

# Lasallian Association and the Vow

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For some years now, there has been extensive discussion on extending the traditional Lasallian concept of association to the lay and clerical partners of the Brothers. Some Brothers have difficulty with this proposal in view of the vow of association that has been a distinctive mark of the way the Brothers express their religious consecration. A brief survey of the history of association in the Institute in relation to the vow might help to clarify this difficulty.

## **Association Before There Was a Vow**

During the early years, as John Baptist de La Salle becomes increasingly involved with the first schoolmasters in Reims, most of them recruited by Adrien Nyel, the reality of association is already present, well before there is any thought of a vow. Whereas Nyel is satisfied to leave these unschooled schoolmasters to themselves and to follow the traditional model of the isolated teacher in a one-room school, De La Salle realizes early on that if the work is to be effective or to have a future, a different approach is needed. He begins by taking the teachers into his home for meals, then has them live there. In this way he is able to provide them with some training and at the same time give them the opportunity to share their experiences in the classroom, to learn from their mistakes, and to correct them. At first gradually and then totally, he begins to link his lot with theirs. He forms them into a community by becoming part of it himself.

Also from the beginning, the association in community has a parallel with association in the schools. The earliest gratuitous schools in Reims dating from 1679, in the parishes of St. Maurice, St. Jacques, and St. Symphorien, are all staffed by at least two Brothers working in tandem and teaching class by the simultaneous method and in the vernacular. In this way they can both support and correct each other, bringing back to table discussions in community their successes and failures. They can compare notes with their colleagues from other schools and learn from the instruction and advice of the older, better educated, and wiser De La Salle. This is the beginning of the end of the tradition of the isolated schoolmaster in the charity schools, making a living for himself by hearing the lessons of the pupils ones by one.

By the time the Brothers assemble in 1684 to discuss what they have achieved and where they are headed, De La Salle has already renounced his ecclesiastical title of canon, his personal wealth, and his family connections to devote himself to the little community that will soon describe itself as a society. A major factor in the success of the schools is their policy of conducting the gratuitous schools by association. In an assembly held probably in 1684 this becomes a rule. A major test of this policy comes when tempting offers begin to arrive from country pastors willing to support a single Brother in a rural school. Rather than yield on the principle of association, De La Salle opens a teacher-training center in Reims, where the

rural pastors can send a single candidate to be trained in the Brothers' methods and then return to run the parish school by himself.

Also in that 1684 assembly, the men who have been associated as teachers decide to call themselves and to be known as Brothers rather than schoolmasters to underscore their commitment to one another. At the same time, the question arises as to how to solidify the association that has brought them a modicum of success. Lacking any kind of legal protection, whether civil or ecclesiastical, they decide to turn to God and bind themselves to God by a vow of obedience, making themselves available to serve as needed in the gratuitous schools conducted by association.

### **The Origins of the Vow of Association**

As the Brothers expand their work from Reims to Paris, they bring with them their tradition of association, gratuity, discipline, and effective teaching. But they soon run into trouble. The pastor of the parish of St. Sulpice wants to interfere with the running of the community and tries to change the religious habit the Brothers wear. Some Brothers abandon their vocation. The Brother that De La Salle sends to study for the priesthood and whom he is grooming to succeed him as Superior, suddenly dies. Then De La Salle becomes gravely ill and almost dies. It looks as if the whole enterprise might collapse.

Once he has sufficiently recovered, De La Salle realizes that he is mistaken in preparing a single Brother to replace him as Superior. He also realizes that the future of his Society should not depend on him alone. His solution is to apply the principle of association to the leadership that will put the Society on a solid foundation. Choosing two of his most competent and trusted Brothers, together with them in 1691 he makes a vow of "association and union to procure and maintain the establishment" of the Society, even if they are the only three to remain and have to beg and live on bread alone. Known as the "heroic vow," this

first vow of association has its intended effect. Programs are put in place for the physical and spiritual renewal of the Brothers, and a novitiate is opened that soon provides a steady supply of new members. By 1694 the situation is stable enough to develop a formal set of Rules and to invite selected Brothers to consider making perpetual vows.

In an assembly in that year, 1694—ever since considered as the first General Chapter of the Institute—twelve Brothers make perpetual vows for the first time. These vows are not the traditional vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, but rather three vows all directed to the educational mission. The central vow is "to keep together and by association gratuitous schools." This is supported by vows of obedience to the body of the Society and of stability in the Society, designed to provide permanence and flexibility to the association. At first glance, the expression "to keep together and by association" seems tautological, but perhaps a certain progression is intended. Not only is each school conducted by two or more Brothers acting in concert (that is, "together"), but they do so "by association," as part of a larger society, or network, of schools. Not all the Brothers are required to take vows, but these are the only vows the Brothers make during the Founder's lifetime and for some few years thereafter.

### **The Vow of Association Is Changed**

After the death of the Founder in 1719, the Brothers undertake to seek from Church authorities in Rome formal approval for their Society as a religious institute (not a religious order). In negotiating for the Bull of Approbation, granted in 1725 by Pope Benedict XIII, it seems that the Brothers themselves want to add the three traditional vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. In the process also, the vow of association is reinterpreted and changed to a vow of teaching gratuitously. Although the reference to "together and by association" is preserved in the second paragraph of the vow formula, the two "special vows," as they come

to be known, are formally designated as teaching gratuitously and stability.

The vow of teaching gratuitously has a rocky history. For one thing, those who enter the Society as serving Brothers do not take the vow. There is a discrepancy between the vow formula (“teaching gratuitously”) and the language of the Bull of Approbation (“teaching the poor gratuitously”).

Especially after the French Revolution, as the Institute expands to new cultural and economic situations, absolute gratuity becomes increasingly problematic. Questions arise:

- What is the object of the vow? teaching? gratuity? or both?
- Who are bound by the vow? the individual Brother? the Community? the Institute?
- Does the vow apply to all schools or only to those where the students are “poor”?
- Who indeed are the poor?

The result is a long series of interpretations, rescripts, and dispensations from the Institute’s superiors and the authorities in Rome during the nineteenth and the early twentieth century to solve problems of policy and conscience.

It is no wonder, then, that in the renewal Thirty-ninth General Chapter of 1966–1967, there is a move to get rid of the two special vows altogether. Motivation is supplied by the widespread accommodation in the Institute to the homogenization of religious life centered on the three traditional vows, the so-called “evangelical counsels,” promoted by the Vatican authorities. But the Chapter takes a different tack. Vatican Council II has directed that religious institutes renew themselves in the light of the Gospel, the signs of the times, and the charism of the Founder. Realizing that the Founder’s charism is notably embodied in the vow of 1694, the Chapter decides to renew and reinterpret the two special vows rather than to eliminate them. Accordingly, the vow of teaching the poor gratuitously is changed to a vow of

“service of the poor through education.” This is seen as support for the new emphasis given by the Chapter to the direct and indirect educational service of the poor. It is a step in a new direction.

### **The Recovery of the Vow of Association**

The confusion in the Church generally and in religious life in particular that follows in the years after Vatican II and the renewal chapters lead the Institute of the Brothers to establish an international committee to deal with questions that have arisen concerning the vows. The committee, headed by Brother Michel Sauvage and composed of Brothers from various parts of the Institute, meets annually from 1972 to 1975. The specific mandate is to address the problems related to temporary vows and the alternative of promises introduced after the Council, as also the objections being raised to the obligatory perpetual vows. The committee does not limit itself to these structural issues but spends considerable time addressing the broader biblical, theological, historical, and canonical implications of the vow structure. Considerable attention is paid to the role and the meaning of the vows at the origin of the Institute. Out of this discussion, the importance of association as central to the Founder’s charism comes to the surface. Among other recommendations, at the end of its report, the committee indicates that it might be time to renew the vow of association and even goes so far as to suggest that it might indeed become the only vow or, at least, the hermeneutical principle to understand the other vows.

Unfortunately at the time, the Institute’s central government is seriously divided. Some Brother Assistants most resistant to change view the work of the committee as an attack on the traditional religious life. They interpret the report as a move to eliminate the demands of poverty, chastity, and obedience, and so to secularize the Institute. After the report is circulated in the United States, there is in the New York District a concerted effort to repudiate the work

of the committee by position papers drawn up in opposition. There are objections from elsewhere in the Institute as well. Although the proposal on association is only a small part at the very end of the report, it seems that the idea of association that has held the Institute together from the beginning had been turned into a force for division. In any case, the international committee on the vows presents its report to the Fortieth General Chapter in 1976, but the Chapter's committee entrusted with the vows has too many other problems to deal with and does not address the topic of the vow of association.

The climate is very different as preparations are underway for the Forty-first General Chapter to be held in 1986. The principal business of the Chapter is to prepare and endorse a new Rule for the Institute to be presented to the Vatican for definitive approval. To this end, the Institute forms a new international committee to prepare, in conjunction with the General Council, which fortunately is no longer divisive, a draft text for the definitive Rule. One concern of the committee is to reintroduce into the Rule as many specific references to the Founder and his vision as possible to make the new Rule distinctively Lasallian. That is why, when it comes to the section of the Rule dealing with the special vows, the committee sees the opportunity to include association in the vow for the service of the poor through education. The General Council agrees in 1985; the General Chapter votes in favor in 1986, the Vatican approves in 1987, and ever since, the fourth vow of the Brothers has been the vow of "association for the service of the poor through education."

The significance of the fourth vow has now been affirmed in the December 2003 pastoral letter of Brother Álvaro Rodríguez, Superior General. In addition to giving a history of the vow, much of which is repeated above, he puts special emphasis on the service of the poor and the work for social justice as the major

thrust of the vow for the Brothers. As the vow committee in 1975 had already suggested, he proposes that the fourth vow of association be a way for the Brothers to interpret and to live each of the other vows. Although he directs most of the pastoral letter to the Brothers, the Superior also describes how their association for the service of the poor is and can be shared with the lay partners based on an ecclesiology of communion.

### **Association Extended to Lay and Clerical Partners**

The renewed understanding of the importance for the Brothers of the vow of association comes at a time when the Institute has been developing an interest and indeed an enthusiasm for sharing with lay and clerical partners the charism of association for the educational mission. This movement to recognize the permanent role of lay and clerical associates, first affirmed in the Declaration voted by the Thirty-ninth General Chapter in 1967, has been a major preoccupation and has intensified in all the General Chapters since then.

Although this movement has raised among some Brothers questions concerning their identity, in another sense it has served to heighten an awareness of how the vowed Brother is different. It is not the "material content" of the vows that constitutes identity. After all, many laypeople are poor and find it harder sometimes than the Brothers to make ends meet; some laypeople are celibate, and most live under structures of obedience in the workplace and in the home. If poverty, chastity, and obedience can be shared, so also can association for the Lasallian mission, Lasallian spirituality, and even community on occasion. But the primary relational context and lifestyle for the vowed Brother lies in his religious community; for the lay and clerical associates, the primary relational context remains the family, the residence, or other such associations.

## Conclusion

The history just reviewed reveals various ways in which Lasallian association and the vow of association are related. The first thing to note is that association has never been an end in itself; Lasallian association is always association for the mission of education in the service of the poor. Association for this mission exists before the Brothers take such a vow. It continues to be the reality from 1725 until 1986, when that specific vow is suppressed. It takes on new life when the vow is restored, and now has life and meaning in tandem with the vow but different from it in the way it functions in the mission. In short, Brothers are associated by vow with Brothers for the Lasallian mission; Brothers are also associated for the sake of the same mission, in various ways and in varying degrees, with people who are not Brothers.



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