

In a Most Imperceptible Manner: The Grace of Association

Rudy Schulze

I have been associated with the Brothers of the Christian Schools for seventeen of my nearly thirty years in Catholic secondary education. I appreciate both the challenges and the graces that accompany such an extraordinary mission to which I and my colleagues in all Lasallian schools have committed our professional life.

Saint John Baptist de La Salle founded the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools in a spirit of faith to address a specific need: the education of poor and disadvantaged youth. According to Brother Luke Salm, FSC, in the year 1680, during the reign of the Sun King, Louis XIV:

As De La Salle himself came gradually to realize, the contrast between the nobility and the upper bourgeoisie on the one hand, and the artisans of the poor on the other, was striking.

(The Work Is Yours: The Life of Saint John Baptist de La Salle, 2nd ed., 45)

Clearly the “best” or “most professional” teachers in the late seventeenth century were the schoolmasters and the writing masters—“a powerful guild of professional scribes under the protection of the king and parliament” (47). These highly paid men taught the children of the upper class in Latin.

De La Salle chose to educate the children of the poor and working class who came to his door. He taught them in their own language, and he taught them the basic skills they needed

for life. Brother George Van Grieken, FSC, describes the beginning of the Christian Schools:

De La Salle’s genius lay in organizing the schools, training and supervising teachers, and adapting various educational methodologies, thereby elevating the lay ministry of teaching within the church and generally doing well what had up to that time been done poorly. Both the religious convictions which led him to see Christ in the poor and the empathy which drew him into his work for educating the poor provided the foundation upon which his view of the vocation of the Christian teacher was progressively built.

(Touching the Hearts of Students: Characteristics of a Lasallian School, 34)

So the first Brothers did not come to work with striking resumes, lists of accomplishments and honors, or dazzling personalities. De La Salle initially had no intention of founding a network of schools. He believed, however, in what the new schoolmasters hoped to do for the poor; he supported them financially, and he even housed them. But he considered them “inferior to my valet.” Reflecting late in his life on the beginnings of the Institute, De La Salle writes:

I had thought that the care which I took of the schools and of the teachers would only be external, something which would

not involve me any further than to provide for their subsistence and to see to it that they carried out their duties with piety and assiduity. . . .

Indeed, if I had ever thought that the care I was taking of the schoolmasters out of pure charity would ever have made it my duty to live with them, I would have dropped the whole project. For since, naturally speaking, I considered the men whom I was obliged to employ in the schools at the beginning as being inferior to my valet, the mere thought that I would have to live with them would have been insupportable to me. In fact, I experienced a great deal of unpleasantness when I first had them come to my house. This lasted for two years. It was undoubtedly for this reason that God . . . willed to commit me entirely to the development of the schools. God did this in an imperceptible way and over a long period of time, so that one commitment led to another in a way that I did not foresee in the beginning.

(Jean-Baptiste Blain, *The Life of John Baptist de La Salle*, book 1, 77 and 80)

As God continued to capture his heart through the mission that was unfolding before him, De La Salle was actually forming communities of teachers (later they called themselves Brothers) to respond to the needs he found in Reims, France, in 1680. At some point, De La Salle realized that *community* is the cornerstone of the Christian Schools.

As religious vowed to the ministry of Christian education, the first apostolate of the Brothers consists in the witness of their consecrated life.

(*Rule*, art. 24)

Indeed, it was the *association* of the Brothers—one with another—as communities that gave flesh, life, and spirit to the mission. The key to De La Salle's success as an educator

(whose spirituality and pedagogy have endured for more than 300 years and whom the Church has proudly named the Patron of Teachers) is that he taught the first Brothers how to be teachers.

He taught them how to “do” the mission by capitalizing on their gifts and talents, weaknesses, and limitations. Moreover, the Brothers' vow of association is for the educational service of the poor—a clarion call to be faithful to the mission God has given to the Institute.

For the Founder and the early Brothers, their *association* matters most. One Brother translates *association* as “It's how we are together that matters.” *Association* is a word that is very dear to the Brothers. It means that *faith* and *zeal* find their context and meaning in the exigencies of everyday life of the young people who come to their schools. As part of their consecration to God, the Brothers make a vow of association among themselves so as to maintain the schools “together and by association.” De La Salle and the first Brothers, as the Rule reminds us, “associated together to respond to the needs of young people who were poor and far from salvation” (*Rule*, art. 47).

Today, the Brothers use the word *partners* to describe their lay colleagues. The choice of that word is deliberate. In his pastoral letter of January 1, 1988, Superior General Brother John Johnston, FSC, writes:

[Laypeople] take their place as “full partners”—and we Brothers gladly associate them with us in our mission. We accept that from now on our schools will not be “Brothers' schools,” animated by the Brothers' community with secondary collaboration of lay teachers, parents, students. They will be instead “Lasallian Schools,” schools animated by Lasallian educative communities of faith “within which the apostolic activity of the Brothers' community takes place” (*Rule*, art. 17a).

(*The Destiny of the Institute: Our Responsibility*, 32)

Facing the declining numbers in the Institute, the Brothers could easily turn in on themselves or resign themselves to the moment when the last Brother will put out the cat and turn off the lights. Instead, the Brothers have opened their arms to those who are willing to commit themselves to the mission. The Brothers have not given away their responsibility for or ownership of the mission. Far from that, they are active, present, and prophetic. Moreover, they welcome the diversity that the partners bring to the mission.

I am not a Brother. I am not a Brother because God has not called me to be a Brother. Therefore, I do not share the kind of *association* that is characteristic of the consecrated, vowed life of a Brother living in community. The “Heroic Vow” of 1691 belongs uniquely to the Brothers, whose only commitment was “the vow of association and union to bring about and maintain the said establishment,” the Society of the Christian Schools (*Rule and Foundational Documents*, 203).

Because my ministry in the Lasallian mission is not my primary life commitment, my *association* is different, and it must be different. This does not mean that I hold back or am reserved in what I bring to school with me each day. Nor does it affect the faith, zeal, or wholeheartedness that I believe characterize my commitment and my professional life. Do I take ownership for the mission? Of course I do. Do I live the mission? I do so as best I can with God’s grace. Am I called? Yes, I am called.

All of us—Brothers and Partners—are called to live the mission within the very diverse contexts of our life commitments. More than that, we give ourselves to the mission according to God’s call, which we have answered with our life, sustained by the graces of our baptismal promises.

As Saint Paul writes to the openly factional Christians at Corinth (1 Cor 12:18–20):

But as it is, God placed the parts, each one of them, in the body as he intended. If they were all one part, where would the

body be? But as it is, there are many parts, yet one body.

Brother John Johnston (in “Lasallian Association for Mission: 1679–2007; A Personal Reflection on an Ongoing Story”) reports his struggle with the “varied, even conflicting, understandings of **association**, **associations**, **associates**, and **associate members**. . . . I was doubtful then that *association* is the best word to promote as an expression of our Institute’s international communion.”

It is, nevertheless, the word we have. God has called us together for mission. Whom God calls and how God chooses to bring the mission to life through us have everything to do with incarnation: spirit breathing life into flesh, Brothers and Partners becoming the Body of Christ. The graces of our diversity, flexibility, talents, and limitations are the potter’s clay. They are uniquely graces which unite us and through which God continually renews the Institute.

We must be mindful and vigilant about *what* we call ourselves and *how* we name one another. We can never allow titles, honors, distinction, or rank to define us. Even the Apostles fell into this perfidious, self-aggrandizing behavior:

They came to Capernaum and, once inside the house, he began to ask them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” But they remained silent. They had been discussing among themselves on the way who was the greatest.

(Mk 9:33–34)

These are terrible temptations, insidious and deceptive. They separate and divide us; they can never unite us. Such trappings will render feckless our best intentions and good works. Because we all work hard, because so many of us have done this for a long time, we may be seduced by a sense of entitlement. We must remind ourselves often that we are the ones who wash the feet of others (Jn 13:14).

“For to everyone who has, more will be given and he will grow rich; but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.”

(Mt 25:29)

Brother Álvaro Rodríguez Echeverría, our Superior General, levels the playing field rather poetically. What he addresses to the Brothers is equally applicable to the Partners:

It is important that we Brothers not forget the why of our community association and the why of this new association with lay persons. I like to apply Association to what Saint-Exupéry says about friendship: “We are not talking about looking at each other but looking together in the same direction.” And this direction is none other than the educational and evangelical service of the young who are poor and, based on them, all young people.

(*Being Brothers in Community: Our Primary Association*, December 25, 2001, 34)

Today we continue to pray for vocations, knowing that it is God’s plan, not ours, that we must discern.

Mr. Stan Gilliam, Class of 1941, was recently named Christian Brothers High School’s Ambassador of the Year. In his remarks, Mr. Gilliam said that he and his classmates “owed everything to the Brothers.” Driving home that night, I could not get those words out of my mind. How could a four-year period of time as a student at Christian Brothers High School—a hiccup in the life of an octogenarian—have had such a profound impact on this man and his classmates?

The answer, I believe, is the mission: “The purpose of this Institute is to give a human and Christian education to the young, especially the poor, according to the ministry which the Church has entrusted to it” (*Rule*, art. 3). The Brothers had reached out and touched his heart.

All of us—Brothers and Partners—share in the rich and enduring Lasallian heritage that demands nothing less than this: “You carry out a work that requires you to touch hearts” (De La Salle, *Meditations*, 43.3). This mission compels our response: *together and by association*.

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Rudy Schulze is Principal of Christian Brothers High School in Sacramento, CA. He has worked in Lasallian schools for seventeen years and is a graduate of the first Lasallian Leadership Institute. Most recently he was a member of the team that designed, piloted, and implemented the Catholic Lasallian Assessment Process for the schools of the San Francisco District.