

# Association: The Lasallian Volunteer Perspective

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“The Spirit of God will lead you where you do not plan to go.” This phrase, adapted from the Gospel of John (21:18), has been in my heart since I first heard it in a Lasallian Youth group where my Lasallian journey began over twelve years ago. I never knew as a fifteen-year-old that this youth group would be just the beginning of many years of travel led by the Spirit—to places I certainly never before planned to go.

When I graduated from high school, I thought my Lasallian days were finished, because I was going to a public university. But as our guiding God would have it, I was able to stay connected through summer gatherings with Lasallian Collegians. A service trip to San Miguel School in Chicago was the pivotal experience that led me to take a leap of faith away from my degree in Communication Disorders and toward the Lasallian Volunteer Program. I felt the Spirit churn inside me as I served at San Miguel and lived in community for that one weekend; it was the kind of feeling that spoke loudly and clearly: “This is it!”

In the years to follow, I lived in community with Brothers and Lasallian Volunteers in California and Baltimore. I also traveled to Bangkok and Sri Lanka as part of the San Francisco District’s Adult Immersion Program. Now I live in Chicago—in community—at San Miguel School in the Back of the Yards neighborhood: the same place that spoke so loudly to me five years ago. None of these experiences would have been possible without the work of the Christian Brothers who answered the call from

the Holy Spirit to take the Institute to places it never before planned to go and to form this Association that many people refer to as the Lasallian Family.

In the past few years, there has been much talk around this idea of Association—as if it were a phenomenon. We are constantly trying to get a handle on what it means for us as a living and breathing institution of Brothers—young and old—and of laypeople—young and old. We are an institution in which people not only work together but also live and play together. We break bread together; we pray together; we take trips together; we even pack up our life and move across the country together—all for the sake of that churning inside us, telling us that we will not be at peace unless we answer the call. The Spirit has led us here: to a beautiful mystery that we are not supposed to understand!

The Lasallian Volunteer Program is for me the best example of how serious the Institute is about this idea of association. Out of the 200 or so Catholic volunteer programs, the Lasallian Volunteer Program is one of the few that require young, lay adults to live in community with vowed members, the Christian Brothers. Some people question the effectiveness of this model, saying that the intergenerational mix does not create a healthy living environment. They criticize the mixing of religious and lay lifestyles and of genders. In my opinion, however, these elements add to the richness of community life.

What is the attraction of this kind of lifestyle? Why do young and old, religious and lay, want to live together? Why would young people choose to move from a lifestyle of freedom, where cereal for dinner and drinking out of the milk carton are commonplace, to a lifestyle where some roommates begin their day at 3:00 a.m. and go to bed at 7:30 p.m.?

The quick and easy answer would be that they choose to do this for the mission. Although, ultimately, I do feel that the mission is the glue, it is unrealistic to believe that this is the motive for all young adults who choose to be Lasallian Volunteers. Not all Lasallian Volunteers have received a Lasallian education, and not all Lasallian Volunteers are even Catholic. In addition, a great number of Lasallian Volunteers are not planning a career related to education after their volunteer commitment.

Saint John Baptist de La Salle's *Meditations* and *The Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility* are not often at the forefront of a college student's mind when choosing to enter into a year of volunteer life in a religious community. Ask any young adult what the Office is, and they will probably answer quite confidently that it's for getting work accomplished. I'm pretty sure that the average young adult does not truly comprehend community living in the Lasallian tradition until it's "too late." Luckily for the sake of the mission, at that point they are "ruined for life." The power of the volunteer year(s) can be so impressionable that people often change career paths, get sucked into the vortex of the Lasallian Spirit, and at the most basic, yet profound, way, recommit their life and their values to those of simplicity and service.

Young adults choose to volunteer for many reasons. They look at our world of violence, poverty, and despair and want to make a positive impact before entering the "real world." I believe that many choose to live in community, as in the Lasallian Volunteer Program, because they long to be part of something with deeper meaning, to be attached to a group of people they can depend on for support and companionship. The longing of young peo-

ple of this generation to be connected to others is apparent in the use of cell phones, the shift to city living as opposed to suburban living, and the creation of what Ethan Watters calls an Urban Tribe—"an intricate community of young people who live and work together in various combinations, form regular rituals, and provide the support of an extended family" (*Urban Tribes: A Generation Redefines Friendship, Family, and Commitment* [New York: Bloomsbury, 2003]; [www.urbantribes.net](http://www.urbantribes.net)).

Moreover, young people are free today to explore opportunities that will deepen their spirituality in profound ways. The Lasallian Volunteer Program is just one way they can live in religious communities without the pressure of expectations or the need to make a lifelong commitment.

This is not to say that community living is blissful—far from it! At times community living was the source of all my frustration, when changing the toilet paper roll or refilling the water container for the umpteenth time was enough to set me over the edge. Living and working with the same people day after day pushed me to my limits while putting a mirror in front of my face to show me some of my grandest weaknesses. The experience called upon a whole new level of patience and understanding while challenging me to rise above my own selfish desires.

But the blessing of community is that other members are usually experiencing the same feelings. In fact, one time during my volunteer years, we all shared stories about our "nightmares" about one or more members of the community, often metaphors for the frustration that had been building inside. Thankfully, we were able to share these nightmares in a loving way because we had been able to build a previous foundation of unity rooted in the spirit of love.

But how? How does a group of men and women, young and old, religious and lay, build a foundation of unity rooted in the spirit of love? It certainly doesn't just happen, and it doesn't happen to the same degree in all communities.

Since my Lasallian Volunteer years, I have become particularly interested in the idea of community, within the Lasallian context as well as in neighborhoods and cities. In two of my three years in Baltimore, I was blessed with an urban tribe that provided the opportunity to experience community living outside the Lasallian context. As a result, I came to three conclusions about what I believe are the most necessary ingredients for producing a healthy and life-giving community environment.

First and foremost, for community to happen, it must be intentional. Community does not just occur. It is unrealistic to think that putting five to fifteen different personalities under one roof with the name Lasallian attached to it is going to create the spirit of community to which I am referring. For community to happen, people must want it to happen. They must agree on what community is, and they must be willing to find a way to create it.

Second, the members must be willing to share themselves and to inquire about others' personal and spiritual journeys. The personal stories of community members are a key ingredient to community. It is not uncommon to find people at the dinner table for hours because they are caught up in sharing stories about life's tragedies and surprises. Young teachers can be seen captivated by the wise Brothers and their sagas of past classroom blunders and teachable moments. Likewise, the shrewd Brothers can be seen lost in the joy of the idealistic young teacher who has all the energy in the world to impact the life of each and every student. These symbiotic relationships thrive on the energy of one another.

In terms of faith sharing, I am reminded of the words of Richard Rohr, who quotes John Henry Newman: "So much holiness is lost to the church because brothers and sisters refuse to share the secrets of their hearts with one another." Rohr continues:

If the church is to be renewed, if family is to happen anywhere, we must again make it possible for heart to speak to heart. All

else will finally show itself to be doctrinaire and ideological, but heart speaking to heart, little pieces of sharing the truth, have every chance of being the 'two or three gathered in His name.' These will be the places of incarnation from which Christ will again be reborn.

*(Near Occasions of Grace, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993, 46)*

Third, community members must be willing to play together. We are all required to work together; often there is a scheduled time to pray together. Everyone usually eats together, but playing together is a bit trickier. Giving up valuable free time for the sake of the community is not only essential to fostering the community spirit but often requires the most sacrifice. Birthday celebrations, holiday parties, happy hours, and weekend trips all contribute to the joys and fruits of community living.

One of my favorite community-bonding experiences occurred when I was living in Oakland. We took a spring-break trip to Zion and Bryce Canyon National Parks. All six of us piled into two cars, slept in tents next to one another, hiked to the mountaintops, and sang embarrassing songs around the campfire. I remember being nervous before going on the trip, because I thought that what I really needed was a full week *away from* these people with whom I spent all my time. But much to my surprise, I realized upon returning that what I really needed was a full week of playtime *with* them—a full week to enjoy one another's company outside the confines of schedules, students, and stress. Playing together that week was a true blessing and testimony to the work of the Spirit.

The Lasallian Volunteer movement is just one example of the Spirit at work within the Institute. Some people are concerned about the diminishing number of Brothers and worry about its adverse impact on the future of the Institute, but I can honestly say that I have nothing but hope for the future of this mission. The Spirit of God, I firmly believe, has only just begun to take this mission to new and exciting

places. I find great comfort in trusting that the association that has already begun will continue to grow and strengthen, offering great hope for the future of the Institute.

Friends and family often ask me why I choose to follow the Christian Brothers and their mission all over the country. They are curious to know how a job can be so important to me that I would risk leaving many beautiful versions of home to create new versions of home in new cities. Seeing the struggle I often have in leaving behind loved ones, they wonder why I would choose to do this to myself. To be honest, I often feel the same way! But for some reason, it feels like the right thing to do. It feels like a call that I cannot ignore—that churning inside hasn't gone away.

While on a mission retreat for San Miguel last fall, I reflected deeply on this struggle and wrote in my journal, "This isn't just a job—it's a way of life. People work here because it completes their version of life. We aren't just coworkers; we are more like sojourners, traveling together and supporting one another along the journey." I return to that reflection often, and I feel grateful for the rich and varied experiences that have come from my Lasallian journey thus far.

The Spirit of God *will* lead us where we do not plan to go. It will be a wild and adventurous ride, as long as we allow the Spirit to do the leading.



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