

## **The Prophecy of Association**

### **MISSION ASSEMBLY DENA DISTRICT 2011**

It is a great pleasure for me to be able to participate in the first Lasallian Educational Mission Assembly for the new DENA District. As you very well know, because you have lived this very well in your Districts of origin, this structure is the result of our last two General Chapters (2000 and 2007). The purpose of this structure is to see that Brothers, lay persons and all those involved in the Lasallian Mission foster shared searching and support for choosing responses for the needs of the young, both in the discernment of current works and in opening new ones, co-responsible preparation for projects and shared activities among all those who share the mission. In support of the above-mentioned points is the issue of encouraging a sense of belonging among all members: belonging to the District, to the Region, to the Institute or to Lasallian living history and to the overall body of associates.

To do this, it is important to have a vision of where we are going and at the same time to live our educational experience not only as a profession, but also as a vocation that God has given us, one in which we need to be creative in our ministries and one that we are invited to live with enthusiasm and vitality.

The General Chapter of 1966-1967 in the context of a changing church and society, encouraged the Brothers to embrace the gospel demands of renewal in this new dramatically changing world. Brothers and thousands of lay men and women engaged in the service of education have responded in a variety of ways: the creation of new ministries and “islands of creativity;” renewing some of our traditional institutions; moving towards the periphery, the boundaries of their society and culture in order to meet abandoned children and youth at risk. In that process, a new language has emerged: the poor, announcing the gospel to the poor, social justice, Lasallian family, colleagues and partners, shared mission, association.

In this presentation I will focus on the experience of association. First of all, in our foundational story.

#### **1. The prophecy of association for mission in the XVII century**

In 1719 at the end of his journey, before he died, De La Salle carefully disposed of all his possessions, books and properties in order to provide some financial security to the Christian schools. In addition, in his Last Will and Testament, De La Salle identified “**the Brothers of the Society of the Christian Schools**”, as “**his associates.**” He had walked with them with the understanding that together they had been called by God, a God that associated them for the mission.

In that document, De La Salle enumerated also some specific recommendations: relationships with the Catholic Church, their interior life, zeal for their employment and union. It is this last recommendation that I would like to examine in this presentation: **To maintain close union among themselves and blind obedience to their superiors...**

De La Salle was not simply suggesting some pious advice. At the crucial moment of his death, he addressed some specific issues that required careful attention. By “union,” he did not just mean bonding together for the purpose of eliciting nice feelings in the community. “Blind obedience” is not recalled as just a virtue to assure one’s perseverance until death. De La Salle is focusing on what has been a disastrous experience, especially since the attempt in Paris to impose ecclesiastical superiors on each one of the communities in 1702. Intentionally or unintentionally some of the detractors of De La Salle, the biographers referred to them as “enemies,” were undermining the unity of the Society of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, both the community and their mission.

From the very beginnings, in the early stages of their common journey, De La Salle had rejected the idea of personal individual projects. Rather, from the very first letter written by the young Canon, he seemed to be assuming leadership of the group, promising to send school teachers of “our community” (June 16, 1682).

However, it is true that it can be said that that in the beginning there was no association. The term did not emerge in his vocabulary until 1691. In the beginning, there was the passion for the education of poor, abandoned children, rooted in the vision of a passionate God attentive to the plight of the poor. At the intersection of the cries of the poor and the attention of a present loving Father, the Brothers experienced a new way of understanding and judging their social context, and a new way of responding to urgent educational needs of the poor, defending their rights and their dignity. This dream of “gratuitous schools” for the artisans and the poor progressively became a project transcending the boundaries of the Archdiocese of Reims and its environs. At the moment when this community, decimated by departures and by the death of some of its members, was in danger of disappearing, De La Salle and his Brothers moved to the Parish of Saint Sulpice in Paris.

De La Salle had well established relationships with the Society of Saint Sulpice. In earlier years he had been a seminarian with them, keeping close ties with some of his spiritual directors. He had a firsthand experience of their involvement in the formation of clergy, and in the spiritual and ministerial renewal of the Church in France. Particularly, with them he had been exposed to the issues and creation of schools for the poor and to the catechetical movement. Ironically, this common vision and expectation did not prevent the interference of the Pastor in the life and the work of the community of Brothers. De La Salle defended the autonomy of this community of lay brothers who had no intention to become priests, and who devoted their life solely to the creation of innovative approaches in the service of education of the poor.

The first “association” was conceived in the midst of a crisis. The fragility of the community weakened their common apostolic project. It was imperative that they remain united and committed in order to ensure the permanency of the community in mission. The secret vow of union and association of three members of the community, John Baptist de La Salle, Gabriel Drolin and Nicolas Wuyart had one purpose: the establishment of the Society of the Brothers.

We really do not know why they chose this strategy to defend the identity, the purpose and the life style of their community. We do know that 50 years before this secret vow, the founders of the Society of Saint Sulpice, under the leadership of Monsieur Jean Jacques Olier had made a similar vow.

Both the narrative describing the motivation for this ritual and the formula used for the celebration of these two events are curiously similar: Both groups, the Sulpicians and now De la Salle with his Brothers constituted a small group of three. Both consecrated themselves to the Holy trinity. Both identified a concrete purpose: The Sulpicians, until the establishment of a Society promised to remain united (*demeurer unis*) in order to work for the instruction and sanctification of the clergy while the Lasallians promised to remain together until the establishment of the Society of the Christian Schools. Both promising to unite themselves, never to leave or to abandon the project.

The parallelism is too striking to be dismissed. De La Salle could have known about this from his seminary years or through one of his Sulpician spiritual directors.

Beyond the literary influence that can be detected by a close examination of both events, it is evident that it can be affirmed that the narrative of Olier helped Lasallians to interpret their own experience, 50 years later.

The vow of union and association was therefore central to the foundation of the Society of the Christian Schools. Furthermore, the new vow of 1691, reinforced the experience of union and association as a fundamental trait of this emerging charism in the life of the Church.

In 1694, the “we” became “I,” a personal promise to unite oneself and to live in Society with... (the names of the Brothers). Keeping together and by association gratuitous schools wherever they may be, even if I were obliged in order to do so to beg for alms and to live on bread alone And to do in the said Society whatever I shall be assigned whether by the body of the Society or by the Superiors who will direct it.

And there it is. In 1694, the vows of obedience to the body of the Society and to the Superiors, the vow of association and of stability, celebrated the mystery of a Trinitarian God, whose glory is the salvation of all, and who has chosen us, calling us together to become his co-workers in this story.

Notice that obedience here is not an additional obligation. It is a central dimension that guarantees association and union. Likewise, stability is not added to the other two. It is the dedication to community building for the continuity of mission. Permanency of a community in mission therefore implies that the mission is the driving force requiring a community charged with the mission. Without association, stability and obedience there would not be a Society of the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

That the Brothers understood exactly the significance of those vows is evident in the proclamation of the election of De La Salle as Superior: *We the undersigned...having*

*associated ourselves with M. de La Salle, priest, by vows pronounced yesterday, to conduct the gratuitous schools together, recognize that, as a consequence of these vows and the association we have created by them, we have chosen M. John Baptist de La Salle as Superior, and we promise to obey him with complete submission, and those he will appoint as Superiors over us.*

*Our intention is that after the above mentioned De La Salle, and forever in the future, no one will be accepted among us, nor chosen as Superior, who is a priest, or who has received holy orders, and we will neither have nor admit any Superior who is not associated and who has not made vows like ourselves and like all those who will be associated with us in the future. Vaugirard, June 7, 1964.*

In my opinion, nothing could express more clearly what the prophecy of association meant and what it required of it. For the promise of that prophecy, they had a price to pay.

In fact most of the tensions with some pastors and Bishops find an explanation in the clarity of the understanding by the Brothers and the lack of understanding of some Church leaders who were unable to appreciate the newness of this community and their way of participating in the mission. The multiple litigations and legal entanglements with other associations, like the corporations of school teachers, schools of charity and the writing masters, were not necessarily motivated by greed or some dark forces of evil. The new community and their educational project did not quite fit into the existing structures. De La Salle was the main target of accusations and legal cases. However, he was often summoned to appear in court with “his associates.”

This is the context in which De La Salle leaves Paris and seeks refuge and peace in Grenoble and Parmenie. In 1714, a letter was addressed to De La Salle by the Brothers, his associates, issuing an order in the name of the body of the Society and humbly calling him to remember his vow of obedience to the body of the Society. The order is simple and clear: to take up responsibility immediately for the overall government of the Society.

This startling document reveals to what extent the Brothers understood their vow of association and union. It begins with a larger vision, the purpose for which they were consecrated: the greater glory of God, the good of the Church and of society. It recognizes the gravity of the situation: the attempt to divide the body into disconnected small communities under the authority of Ecclesiastics. But most importantly, it recognizes that De La Salle is the one chosen, the one who has been given the graces and talents to govern this new company. The order is quite direct: to take up again the care and overall direction of the holy work of God.

By 1719, the association process had been consolidated. The Brothers talk as a “we.” They can now look to a future without De La Salle. By “Union and association” neither the Brothers nor De La Salle meant a warm feeling of being together. It is a legally binding committee which binds them together for a common work.

Beyond the legal implications, let us not forget the Mystical dimension that energized those commitments. In the Explanation of Interior Prayer, De La Salle identifies the center of this

association in the experience of Jesus Christ present in the midst of the community. Like branches attached to a common vine, we are one body in which each branch is called to produce fruit. The pulse of this body: A continuing movement from our actions to the center, and from the center back to our actions. A body that breathes in and out with the same beliefs, the same sentiments, the same practices. A sign that God is present in our midst, whether we are working, studying, praying, or resting.

A sign of the presence of a Trinitarian God, this union is like a sacrament of the essential union of God Father, Son and Holy Spirit. On the Vigil of the Ascension, at the time in which ordinarily the Brothers held their assemblies, De La Salle invites them to pray:

*Entreat the God of hearts,  
to keep your hearts  
and those of your Brothers  
one, in the heart of Jesus.*

## **2. Prophecy of an association in the making: What it means today.**

Our recent General Chapters reminded us of the steps we have taken from Chapter to Chapter over the course of the past forty years. From the recognition of the lay ministry in the Lasallian school in the Declaration of 1967, to degrees of belonging and to the first lay experience of association with the birth of the Signum Fidei Fraternity in 1976. From the theme of the Lasallian Family in 1986 to the Shared Mission in 1993. Beginning in 2000 we speak of associating ourselves for the educational service of the poor, based on the poor, as the major Lasallian challenge in light of the twenty-first century.

Some may think that so much change in our language and policies might mean a lack of consistency or a type of instability, responding to the fashion of the moment. My own personal view is that that is not the case. Rather, it seems to me that it is about an experience similar to that lived by Saint John Baptist de La Salle, who felt that God was leading him from commitment to commitment, with tenderness and wisdom, to take the necessary steps to assure the Christian education of the poor and the young. Associating ourselves today is a guarantee of the future.

I am personally convinced that the theme of the Shared Mission which inspired our 42<sup>nd</sup> General Chapter was the key to discovering, seven years later, that we Brothers and lay partners need to associate ourselves in order to discover how to make progress with schools in service of the young, starting from the poor.

It seems to be that the theme of Association is the heart of our 43<sup>rd</sup> General Chapter. It would be presumptuous for me to try to present to you all the richness of our chapter assembly. I will be content with highlighting some points which I personally feel are very important.

The Chapter did not want to have the last word – so it left room for new searches and achievements. If as it says in the Rule of the Brothers that the mission is always to be

discovered, we can also say that association is being constructed day by day. And if there should be freedom in searching, freedom in personal decision making regarding association is also fundamental. Association can never be the result of an imposition nor should it be a kind of trampoline that is used to reach positions of prestige.

The Chapter also emphasized for us some marks that should be present in association as reference traits. Allow me to make a brief comment on each of them.

- *a vocation to live in accordance with the charism of Saint John Baptist de La Salle and his values.* This has to do with being aware of who we are as expressed by the Founder in his Meditations for the Time of Retreat – cooperators and ambassadors of Christ and his Church, guardian angels for our students...It is about living the wonderful profession of teacher as a call from God to build his Kingdom through Christian education and being inspired by Lasallian values.

- *a life of faith that discovers God in reality, in the light of Scripture and for persons of other religions according to their own sacred texts.* This has to do with discovering God's saving plan, enlightened by God's Word, in events and in persons, especially the poor, as the Founder was always attentive to and moved by reality in the light of faith. This experience can be lived from each respective creed, other Lasallians committed with us in building a more human world through education.

- *a community experience, lived in different ways and according to the identity of each one.* The Lasallian experience is not a solitary adventure. The community dimension is an essential trait, working in groups, a common program. It is not duplicating the religious community of the Brother but of experiencing a community of reference that accompanies, helps one to grow and has the undiminished commitment of other communities of reference on the family, social or political levels. Every Lasallian is called to feel like a brother or sister without borders, always willing to lend a hand and to overcome differences.

- *a mission that is associated with the service of the poor and that involves some time.* The purpose of our association is the educational service of the poor and, from them, young people in general. No matter where we carry out our mission, we need to have a serious concern and a clear preference for those who need us the most. This purpose should make us creative and should lead us to sensitize the more well-off young people to the shortages of others, not just on the statistical level but with concrete experiences that will allow them to get to know reality better. Association is not a one-day flower. It takes, as the Chapter tells us, a certain duration which is not specified but which I think could vary according to various cases.

- *a universal openness that opens us to dimensions that go beyond the personal and the local reality.* The associate feels he is part of an international Institute and is not identified only with the local place in which he works. He has a sense of District, Region, Institute. He is open to new possibilities and new adventures.

The Chapter encouraged the formation of Lasallian intentional groups in the spirit of association for mission, and it invited an increase in associative experiences, accompanied by and fostering discernment. It proposed to the Brothers to accept these experiences positively, as a revealing sign of prolific ministry and spirituality, to share the contributions

of the respective identities of other Lasallians, and it encouraged them to contribute creatively and dynamically to the onset and evolution of different structures of association, acting as an enlightening conscience and, if necessary, a critical one as well.

With the encouragement of recent General Chapters and the Lasallian International Assembly, but especially in response to the expectations of many Lasallians, a process of formation has been developed in many sectors of the Institute, at various levels of depth, directed at lay persons, Brothers and, frequently, both at the same time. This is not about merely an intellectual type of formation, but it is an attempt to try and acquire Lasallian identity, to take an in-depth look at the spirituality, to identify with the mission, to obtain an increased sense of belonging to this community for the education of the poor

I have one recommendation. Do not be afraid of the structures of the new association in its various levels, such as in the Council and Assembly for the Lasallian educational mission. And do not reduce these structures to the purely functional. They should be structures that allow us to proclaim the prophetic word and more, that allow us to perform prophetic acts, responding creatively to the problems that the youth face today, especially the youth who are poor, the less loved, those who have more learning difficulties, those marginalized, and those forgotten. Let us hope that these structures will allow us **to see** the world with God's eyes, full of compassion and tenderness; **to listen** with God's ears, to the voice, to the cries, to the anguished wailing of the people; **to feel** with the heart of God, and his innermost depths of mercy, and then and only then, **to proclaim** the word of God – a word of conversion and solidarity capable of transforming reality.

### **Conclusion**

I want to end these reflections by sharing with you what I also said to the Brothers in my Pastoral Letter, recalling the words of one of our modern day prophets, some time before he was murdered. *We must see with eyes wide open and feet firmly set on the ground, but with the heart also full of the Gospel and full of God* (Archbishop Oscar Romero, 27 August 1978).

To have wide-open eyes and hearts aflame is what our last General Chapter also asked of us. And the call to have wide-open eyes makes us realize that we live at a difficult time in human history, as I have already pointed out earlier, and at a delicate moment in the life of the Church. We may have all noticed this, especially during the past year. Personally, I don't think this is a negative moment, but rather, a moment of grace. The prophets worked in similar situations and in times of crisis. The process of association which we are living should be for us a fresh opportunity and should awaken in us a huge amount of creativity. I end just as I began, inviting you all to live in hope because we are certain, as St. Paul says, that God who began the work, will bring it to a good end (Philippians 1: 6).

Brother Álvaro Rodríguez Echeverría