

3. ASSOCIATION

3A. ASSOCIATION AS A STYLE OF LIFE AND ACTION

Summary:

1. The concept of Association. – 2. How St. JBDS uses the word. 2.1. A rare but essential word. 2.2. Origin of the Association. 2.3. Association as an essential structure in the community. – 3. To hold schools together and by association. 3.1. Communitarian educative action. 3.2. Uniformity in pedagogical methods. 3.3. Co-operation in the management of the school. – 4. Association as a style of life. 4.1. He did nothing using his own authority. 4.2. “We order you in the name and on behalf of the body of the Society...”.

1. THE CONCEPT OF ASSOCIATION

The word Association signifies a bond between persons, aiming at a goal to be pursued together, but at the same time, the word defines the way in which the goal should be attained.

The Dictionnaire de Trévoux (1721) offers the following definition: “A social agreement by which two or more persons join together, either to help each other, or to work together or to live more comfortably. The closest association is that which is constituted in marriage. Association is entered into by a perfectly simple consent”.

2. HOW ST. JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE USES THE WORD

2.1. A rare but essential word

The word association (and the verb to associate) rarely occurs in the writings of St. La Salle, but it takes on an extraordinary importance when he uses it to describe his vision of the life of the Brother, his consecration, his mission, the communitarian dimension of his apostolic commitment.

Besides the type of internal bond which characterises the Institute of the Brothers of the

Christian Schools, to the extent of forming the object of a specific vow for its members, the word association is always used by the Founder on several occasions to mean a bond between persons. The most important passages where this is mentioned are:

* In the “Devoirs d’un Chrétien” (Da 377): Association means the union of a man and a woman in marriage, “raising that association and that union of the man with the woman to the dignity of a sacrament” for the benefit of the married couple and the achievement of the aims of the marriage.

* In the Meditations, (MF 174.2), the term is used to describe the bonds between St. Bruno and the six persons “he gathered together” to experience together what religious life was like. The same meaning is given to it in “short life of St. Yon”, in the appendix to the Meditations (CL 12, p. 269), when it is said that “St Yon associated himself with the evangelizing mission” through St. Denis, and in the “Devoirs d’un Chrétien” (Da 252) where it is said that St. John preached first at Jerusalem “where, with St. Peter, he got St. Paul to associate himself with the other Apostles”.

However, the main significance of what La Salle had in mind, and to which we want to draw

the attention of the reader, is that which stands out in the Brothers' formula of vows constantly repeated since 1694:¹ "I promise and vow to unite myself and to remain in the Society of the Brothers, to keep together and by association gratuitous schools... These vows of association and stability in the said Society and of obedience..." (CL 2,42). But the public use of the word "association" had a precedent which has remained a secret.

2.2. The origin of the Association.

At the close of 1691, at a crucial moment for the budding Institute of the Christian Schools, La Salle found himself obliged to look for the most appropriate means to rescue and consolidate his work.

Having described the very serious situation which prevailed in 1690-1691, Blain states: "After much reflection on the means to shore up an edifice which was crumbling at the same time as it was being erected, he was inspired to: associate himself with the two Brothers whom he considered most qualified to prop up the budding community and to bind them to himself by an irrevocable engagement, that of continuing its foundation" (Blain 1, p. 312).

The formula which was used secretly² by the trio on Nov. 21, 1691 to make their association formal constitutes what we call the heroic vow. It asserts what has been said here: "Most Holy Trinity, we consecrate ourselves entirely to Thee, to procure with all our ability and efforts the establishment of the Society of the Christian Schools, and for this purpose, I, John Baptist de la Salle, priest; I, Nicholas Vuyart, and I, Gabriel Drolin... make the vow of association and union, to bring about and maintain the said establishment... In view of which we promise to do together and by common accord, everything we shall think in conscience, and regardless of any human consideration, to be for the greater good of the said Society..." (Blain 1, p. 313).

In this formula, we already find the gist of the Lasallian concept of association:

— Association is the basis for the foundation of the Institute;

— Association means "unanimous action and common consent" in all the decisions necessary to safeguard the life of the Society;

— Association defines the reciprocal bond which keeps together the members of the Institute.

The vow made on Nov. 21, 1691 represents a clear profession of faith and hope. Brothers Sauvage and Campos stress the prophetic value of this gesture which, for La Salle, does not only spell out his trust in God, but also his concrete and increasing confidence in the men with whom he had associated himself:

"The perpetual and "heroic" vow is La Salle's reaction to a desperate situation; a dash forward, an act of theological hope.

AN ACT OF HOPE IN A FAITHFUL GOD.

The formula of vows starts with an invocation to the Holy Trinity, which acts as a GUIDELINE to the content of the commitment. It is God who had entrusted La Salle with the care of the schools. The certainty that he was guided by God's will does not abandon him then: however dark the night, he intends to keep going, relying on this interior certainty. For it is God's work which is being carried out and he cannot give it up. The living God who was with him at the start, who is still present throughout this night and speaks to his heart will always be there; he will continue to call for creativity and will provide the light and strength required to answer in a concrete manner.

La Salle's act of theological hope manifests and strengthens itself by an act of hope in concrete men. The Founder's gesture is not that of a prisoner or a convict, but a free and liberating gesture which frees him from his perplexity. It is a gesture of love, of a love implying a concrete trust in men. In his perplexity, this trust in men manifests itself realistically in fresh efforts to join his friends.

In so doing, La Salle's action looks like a prophetic gesture in the biblical sense of the word. It is the gesture of a Seer who, inspired by the Spirit, is able to discern through the darkness of the night and the ambiguous fragility of the signs, a presence, a call, the will of the living God at work among men for the realisation of man's salvation: "the liberation, the life of men, the Alliance".³

2.3. Association as a mainstay of the community structure

As has already been said, starting with the formula of 1691, association serves to express, as early as 1694, a fundamental element of the consecration of all the Brothers, and to describe the life structure of the Society of the Christian Schools.

We shall therefore come across it in several key texts:

* In the formula of perpetual vows made by twelve Brothers on the Feast of the Holy Trinity 1694,⁴ as has already been said.

* In a very important text, drawn up on the same occasion.⁵

* In "the formula for the election of a superior" which they drew up the following day, the twelve who made the vow in 1694 recall explicitly that the commitment of the previous day binds them together in an "association". And it is as a result of this new state of things that they proceed with the regular election of a superior and that they draw up definitely this or that statutory regulation:

"We the undersigned, having associated ourselves with M. John-Baptist de la Salle, priest, to hold together and by association gratuitous schools by the vows which we made yesterday, affirm that, as a result of our vows and the association which binds us through them, we have chosen for superior M. John-Baptist de la Salle: we promise to obey him showing our entire submission in accordance with the vow we made, we shall obey likewise those whom he appoints as our superiors, We declare that we also maintain that the present election which we have made of the said M. de la Salle as our superior, is not meant to have any evil consequences, our intention being that, after him, in future and always, there will not be any person, and none will be accepted by us, nor be chosen as superior, who is priest or has received holy orders, and that we will not even accept nor admit any superior who is not associated with us and has made the vow with us, like all those who will be associated with us in future".⁶

In this fundamental document can clearly be seen the total awareness which the Founder and

the Brothers had concerning the central place the concept of association deserved to have, either as a basis for the personal bond existing between them, or for the present and future of the institution itself.

Moreover, as Campos and Sauvage state, this preoccupation was not theoretical: "Once more we realize here the strong connection between the total consecration to God and his Kingdom and the structural internal process of a fraternal association fully aware of its objectives and the necessary means to reach them. Such an explicit way of doing things was later to become a force able to strengthen the Community in squalls which could have destroyed it. For in the twenty years that followed, the principle of government of the Institute by itself was to be questioned several times".⁷

* In the explanation about what obligations the vows imply: "Recueil de différents petits traités à l'usage des Frères des Ecoles Chrétiennes",⁸ in the section related to association one may read: "The obligations of the vows are: to keep schools in association, with those who form part of the Institute, and those who will in times to come be part of it, in any place where they may be sent and to do whatever job may be given to them by their superiors".

3. TO KEEP THE SCHOOLS TOGETHER AND BY ASSOCIATION

The first area on which association will have a very serious influence is precisely that of the foundation and conduct of the apostolic mission of the Brothers in the school.

It is not in vain that in the formulas analysed above the logical trend of mind is: "we have united and associated ourselves to keep schools together and by association". In the 1691 heroic vow, there was a clear explanation as to how the vow could be kept in practice: "to do together and by common consent all that was necessary for their maintenance and development".

In practical terms, for the Founder and the Brothers that meant:

3.1. A community educational apostolate

The need to give the apostolic activity of the Brothers a strict community basis was a requirement that the Founder perceived immediately and constantly. In that consists De La Salle's ingenious and original intuition, which presupposes and at the same time postulates the idea of association. This is clearly stressed in the following page of Michel Sauvage:

"It was therefore necessary to get them together: to organise a "Community" which could co-ordinate efforts, set up the general methods, as well as keep up the apostolic drive; a common life was imperative, making it necessary for all to accept a set of rules, implying also the need for each to make himself available and to submit to a common lifestyle. This life in common, thus geared towards the apostolate, had of necessity to be distinguished by the need for a spiritual formation based on prayer and asceticism. Finally and above all, a Leader, "a master in spirituality" was needed.

John Baptist understood almost immediately, one might say, the concrete implications of life in "community" as a requisite for the success of the schools; he had to get the masters to live together under the same roof, give them a common programme of spiritual exercises. He very soon carried that out; he rents a house where they can lodge; he gives them a regulation. And he follows them up as best he can. However, he will only take the final decision when he has clearly understood that God is calling him to consecrate himself entirely to these schoolmasters whom he had been directing only "exteriorly", until then, as he himself said. From then on, he will understand that he must become like one of them, share their whole existence, their "exercises", accept like them material insecurity.

From then onwards, aware that God's will was on his side, J.B. will not swerve one inch from its accomplishment. To the building up of his community, he will bring to bear a power and a perseverance which some will take for obstinacy: he will defend its originality, its internal autonomy with inflexibility, considering that in order to guar-

antee the formation, the stability of its members, the community of the Brothers had to possess its own well-defined character, the outlines of which were to become gradually more precise in his eyes, in the light of past experience".⁹

3.2. Uniformity in teaching methods

This is the second fruit of association in the scholastic sphere, clearly spelled out in several Lasallian texts: "They will teach all their pupils according to the method which is given to them and which is universally practised in the Institute and they will neither change anything nor introduce anything new in it" (RC 7.3 p. 34). The Conduct of Schools¹⁰ explains this "method which is given to them", controlling in every detail the whole school life and carrying the principle "together and by association" to its fullest and most fruitful consequences.

This principle is rendered more effective still by the permanent commitment never to exercise the ministry of education alone, a commitment vouched for in the Bull of Approbation of the Institute: "Scholas regent semper associati et saltem bini singulis scholis simul praesunt"¹¹ which quite opportunely justifies this decision by the association. Brother Michel SAUVAGE comments:

"What distinguishes these school-teachers at first sight, is the fact that they are living together, never keeping schools alone: a fundamental rule of the Institute, very soon defined by the Founder, and which he never wanted to break, and as a result, he refused to send Brothers to isolated places in the countryside. The Brothers also vow to "run schools together and by association". In this manner, greater uniformity in the teaching could be guaranteed; the pedagogical progress which the Founder's action helps to realise, being the work of a living community, will have better chances of lasting; his community will be very careful to treasure, to recopy constantly not without conforming them to new requirements. The pedagogical writings of M. de la Salle: The Duties of a Christian, the Conduct of Schools, the Rules of Good Manners and Civility will thus be often re-edited".¹²

3.3. Co-operation in the management of the school

It is not only the school that should be animated by a community and in a concrete manner by at least two Brothers working together, there must also exist within the teaching community itself a network of mutual relationships, of collaboration, of stimulation, of advice... which express in day-to-day practice the spirit and the letter of the association.

We would like to recall but a few of the basic elements¹³ which are underlined by the Conduct of Schools:

- the formation of young teachers by more experienced Brothers (CE 185);
- the role of the Inspector of Schools (RC p. 48; CE op. 249-290);
- numerous consultations are contemplated during the interval between “lessons”; the sharing out of class duties or “Offices” among pupils; Rewards, Corrections, etc.. (CE p. 273 ... 204-205; 99; 139, 148; 150; 157).

Moreover, in the Preface of the Conduct of Schools, we note very clearly a style — but over this we shall have occasion to come back — which tells a lot about the concrete implementation of association between the first Brothers:

“This method has been prepared and put in order only after a great number of conferences with the oldest and most capable teachers among the Brothers of the Institute, and after several years of experience. Nothing has been added that has not been thoroughly deliberated and tested, and of which the advantages and disadvantages have not been weighed and, in so far as possible, the good or bad consequences have not been foreseen”. (CE, CL 24,2).

4. ASSOCIATION AS A LIFE STYLE

What was stated in the formula of consecration: “I promise and vow to unite myself and to stay in the Society with the Brothers”, was not meant only for the life of the Brother as a teacher: “together and by association constitutes the Founder’s and the Brothers’ very own and permanent life style, it had to affect every aspect of daily life.

We shall here recall only two of the most important of these aspects.

4.1. He did nothing without consultation¹⁴

What has been quoted about the drafting of the “Conduct” is not an isolated or unusual gesture but rather La Salle’s habitual way of proceeding. “All the biographers of the Founder put in evidence the way in which this principle was invariably at the centre of his decisional processes and being applied at the moment of the birth of the Brothers’ Religious family. “He never did anything of his own will”: It is the most commonly heard expression every time reference is made to the drafting of the Common Rules, the choice of school methods, the making of the vows, his transfer to Paris, the internal organisation of the Institute, etc... A continuous effort of discernment of God’s will and the good to be done, thanks to the contribution made by the community through prayer, dialogue, confrontation, discussion... constituted the Founder’s habitual way of acting when faced with the toughest choices”.¹⁵

4.2. “We command you in the name and on behalf of the Body of the society”¹⁶

The Brothers had sufficiently well grasped the meaning, in theory and practice, of “together and by association”. On several occasions, they gave evidence of this.¹⁷

Suffice it to recall the crucial moment during which this life style expressed itself most fully and explicitly, not only by the Founder but also by the Brothers.

It occurred when a letter was addressed, on April 1, 1714, to make him return to Paris to resume the Direction of the “Society”. A letter echoing abundantly the formula of vows and revolving around the basic concept of association:

“The conclusion of the letter contains a clear reference to the vow of association made by La Salle in 1694: “We order you, in the name and on behalf of the body of the Society to whom you promised obedience, to resume without delay the general direction of our Society”. But it is the entire context of the letter of the Brothers and the

very language they use, which recalls the formula of Vows. It is “to procure the greater glory of God that the Brothers undertook that step; La Salle had received from God the call to “set up and conduct” the Society of the Christian Schools; the word “Society” — or its equivalent, “Company” — is repeated four times in these few lines: the purpose of the letter was to tell the Founder that his Brothers always stood in need of his presence and his concern: “the good of the Society” which he had committed himself to promote required it, and the “common consent” of the associates pleaded with him to come back.

But through this reminder of the language used in the formula of vows, the Letter also regained through it a dynamic momentum and a mystic meaning. For if the entire text considers the “welfare of the Society”, it recalls at the start that the latter was set up “for the glory of God”.

The Institute existed by itself, since its members had decided to get together on their own initiative. The body of the Society remained alive and compact, for it showed itself and spoke up as an entity. The association held well together: it is in its name that the Brothers of the Parisian area assembled, it was on it that they based themselves to recall their Founder...

So, the Brothers’ decision proved in practice that the structuring of the Institute had reached its goal and on that score, the Founder’s role as Father had been carried out with success: La Salle had fathered a living body, conscious of its own existence, active, responsible. But in its literal meaning the letter which the Brothers sent their Founder said much more. It asserted that this living organism was endowed with a soul. It proved that the father had also been able to breathe a spirit into the association formed by his sons. The structuring process brought to light and upheld an inspiration”.¹⁸

In the light of what we have just recalled in a nutshell, it is clear that the association concept is pivotal and creative in the totality of the lasallian vision, not only when it is a question of the interior and spiritual outlook of the persons concerned but also in the principles and forceful words applied to community and apostolic life which owed La Salle its origin and identity.

¹ The public formulae used by the Brothers before 1694 have been kept. We possess that of 1694, autographed, at the AMG among the Letters of the Founder and repeated 13 times in the “Livret des premiers vœux” (cf CL 2 p. 42).

² CL 2, p. 40 Bro. Maurice HERMANS underlines: “The words and the circumstances of the permanent act make it possible, certainly, to speak here of “a secret association”: “associated” obliged to act henceforth, “unanimously and by common consent”. M. de la Salle and his two disciples, unknown to all the others, are just that. No outside person no other Brother had any say in it; also, none had been informed. For our texts, the first perpetual vows of Nicolas Vuyart and Gabriel Drolin will only bear the date 6th June 1694. The first two biographers — Bernard and Maillefer — know nothing about the heroic act: their informers, Bros. Antoine and Jean themselves also seem not to have been in the know”.

³ M. SAUVAGE-M. CAMPOS, A.E.P., Beauchesne, Paris 1976, pp. 145-146.

⁴ BLAIN I, pp. 343-344.

⁵ CL 2, p. 43; Blain I, pp. 345-348.

⁶ Livres des premiers vœux, folio 18: Complete text with names and signatures in CL 3, pp. 10-11.

⁷ SAUVAGE and CAMPOS, *o.c.*, p. 200.

⁸ CL 15, p. 4: This text is repeated and slightly added to in the Common Rules of 1726 [9]. By the same vow, they promise to open schools by association with the Brothers assembled for that purpose, anywhere where they may be sent; or to do anything they will be asked to do by their superiors, as is said in the formula of vows CL 25,6.

⁹ M. SAUVAGE, *CAL.*, 1991, pp. 54-55.

¹⁰ CE in the Preface it is stated: “It has been necessary to draw up this *Conduite des Ecoles Chrétiennes* so that everything would be done uniformly in all the schools and in all the places where there are Brothers of this Institute and that practices be always the same”.

¹¹ Bulle 6, CL 11, p. 359.

¹² M. SAUVAGE, *o.c.*, p. 63.

¹³ M. PRESCIUTTINI, *La scuola opera di Comunità*, in *Rivista Lasalliana* 1/1991, pp. 30-35.

¹⁴ MAR. p. 72: the expression is slightly changed in the CL 6 p. 73. cf. Blain 1, p. 340.

¹⁵ M. PRESCIUTTINI, *L'attualità del Fondatore*, in *Atti del 2° Congresso Nazionale Lasalliano*, Roma 1990, pp. 24-25. Cf. Saturnino GALLEGÓ, *San Juan Bautista de La Salle*, BAC, Madrid 1986, vol. 1, pp. 178, 195, 209, 239, 243, 262, 315, 342.

¹⁶ BLAIN 2, p. 118. There one can find the whole text of the Letter.

¹⁷ For example, when an ecclesiastical superior is imposed on the Brothers: Campos and Sauvage, AEP, p. 200; Blain 1, p. 409-413.: In 1702, as a result of tendentious reports which has reached him about M. de la Salle, Card. de Noailles, Archbishop of Paris, had decided to replace him by an ecclesiastical superior of his choice. The information was passed on to the Brothers by the Vicar General. But the Brothers reacted very strongly against this change: they finally obtained that the Superior nominated by Noailles would have no real authority, and that M. de La Salle would continue to govern their Society”.

¹⁸ SAUVAGE et CAMPOS, AEP, pp. 206-209, cf. M. CAMPOS, CL 45, pp. 306-312.

Complementary Themes:

Community-Society-Institute, Consecration, School, Employment, Ministry, Mission, Obedience, Stability, Vows.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. BLAIN, CL 7 and 8.
2. *Cahiers Lasalliens*: 12, 13, 15, 20, 24, 25.
3. GALLEGRO S.: *San Juan Bautista de La Salle*, BAC, Madrid 1986, volume 1.
4. CAMPOS Miguel: CL 45.
5. SAUVAGE M., *Catechesis and the Laity*, Brisbane, 1991.
6. SAUVAGE and CAMPOS, *Announcing the Gospel to the Poor*, Romeoville, 1981.
7. MAURICE-AUGUSTE, *Les vœux des FEC avant la Bulle de Benoît XIII*. CL 2.
8. *2° Congresso Nazionale Lasalliano*.
9. *Rivista Lasalliana*, Torino 1991.

Bro. Mario PRESCIUTTINI

Translated from French by Bro. James CALLEJA