

WORKING TOGETHER**LIKE BROTHERS****IN OUR MISSIONARY TASK****Some reflections on the lay-teachers
in our Lasallian establishments.****1. ... "And the first school masters discovered that they were like brothers."**

Saint John Baptist de La Salle wrote the following words: "I had at first imagined that my interest in the schools and their teachers was simply as their adviser, and that my only commitment to them was to ensure their well-being and to see to it that they performed their work like Christians and educated persons." (1). However he soon realised that he was moving along a road with those teachers that would result in a religious congregation, whose members would be called brothers. In fact they were to be called "Brothers of the Christian Schools", because they wanted to live together and be able to show to everyone that they were real brothers.

John Baptist discovered that in order to do God's work in schools, the teachers had to be holy men. They needed a firm sense of God, a well-founded spirit of Faith and an unflagging enthusiasm for their work: a determination never to give up. In other words John Baptist found out through his association with school-work, what task God wanted the teachers to undertake. That task, which in its turn required a serious preparation. Now in order to make sure that the schools would continue, together with their mission and ministry, he concluded that the teachers should live together and commit themselves to supporting one another in every sphere. Living together naturally led to the idea of brotherliness or fraternity, since they had the same work to do and needed to show perseverance in that God-given work. The next step in this reasoning was for John Baptist to be inspired with a real sense of fraternity, which, resulting from living together, meant living like brothers and in fact being real brothers. This was a genuinely providential journey which led him gradually to greater and greater involvement without his at first realising it. This was remarkable, because he later wrote: "If I had known earlier that the interest that I took through kindness in those teachers, would force me to live with them, I would have given up that interest". (2). However, inspired by Providence, he managed to make a true family out of those men; a family in which they not only made every effort to live like brothers, but were in fact brothers indeed. Thus work led to mission, mission to living like Christians. After that came living together, then the common task of ensuring the

schools' continuation, fraternity, and finally the making of religious vows. Those were just some of the steps along which Providence guided John Baptist and his early teachers.

Blain tells us why he decided on the name "brother". The changes in their way of life led to the change in their name. The name "brother" was entirely fitting and was thus adopted; the name school-master was to be reserved for men who taught to earn a living. Blain continues: "If the name "school-master" had been acceptable up to that time in a residence where togetherness and equality had not succeeded in uniting people unsure of their vocation, it was certainly unacceptable once they were united enough to form a single body. Therefore the name "brother" was entirely fitting, for that is what we call children of the same blood and the same father, and what kind people call those who have the same spirit and the same Father in Heaven. Thus the title "Brothers of the Christian and Gratuitous Schools" became the name of the sons of Mr. De La Salle. This is a very appropriate name, because it carries the very sense of the love which inspired the beginnings of their congregation and which should continue to be its life and soul. That love and charity should be present in all their discussions and be at the heart of all their plans. It is what must urge them to work and action, must surround all their activities, inspire all they say and do. The name "brother" shows them the worthiness of their profession, the excellence of their way of life and the dignity of their work. It reminds them that since they are true brothers, they should have a heartfelt but spiritual friendship with one another, and that, because they are like elder brothers of their students, they should give their lessons with love and an open heart." (3).

Hence according to the biographer of our Holy Founder, the first members of the institute really understood the meaning of "brother" and had a genuine sense of "brotherliness".

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2. Lay-teachers share in the mission of the Institute.

Throughout its history and owing to a variety of circumstances, the Institute has had to ask the help of lay-teachers to accomplish its educational work.

It has happened that in certain places and at certain times this help has been looked on as a necessary evil, which time would remedy; the lay-teacher was something added from outside. This way of looking at the matter resulted from the period and circumstances in which those reflections were made.

Nevertheless these teachers were offering themselves and their work to the establishment in which they laboured and that establishment had a mission it could never abandon, namely to form Christians. It is an apostolic mission given by God and the church to the Institute and which the latter

fulfils in every one of the its undertakings and by means of everyone of its members.

Therefore the lay-teacher who works in any of our establishments is a co-worker in that establishment and shares in the mission for which it was founded.

It is true that in order to share in a mission certain qualities are needed. For example one should know about the mission, feel in sympathy with it, become qualified for it and even be a convincing witness of it.

The mission of the Institute and of each one of our foundations is an apostolic one, which results from the Faith and apostolic commitment of the people who work in that mission.

It follows from this that the teachers who share in our work should also understand the meaning of that mission and their own vocation to share in it. But how will they find out these things if no one tells them?

Now our Founder worked with the first teachers in helping them to find out God's plan for them and for the Christian Schools. So in the same way the Institute should make efforts to help the lay co-workers to realise the apostolic meaning of the place where they work and whose very reason for existing is the apostolic mission of education.

This is the responsibility of the Institute and of every educational establishment. The lay-teacher might be very well qualified at a professional level to teach the subjects in which he is specialised. But as soon as he joins a community of apostles to undertake with them some of the teaching, those apostles should provide him with what the community stands for. He should in fact receive a spiritual and apostolic formation. In other words we have the duty to give to our lay-teachers that aspect of formation that they were not able to acquire before joining one of the De la Salle schools.

We might think that this is wishful thinking. We know that among our lay-teachers there are some who are not believers or who have lost the Faith; there are even some who have a different religion. How can we count those as co-workers in the mission of the Institute? That is the question, and nevertheless their association with us is a definite fact. Let us not forget that there is a parallel in the ministry of the church, for Baptism is considered valid even when administered by a non-believer. Without a doubt, a thought which is worth reflecting on.

One thing is certain: the lay-teacher in an educational institution which has a religious mission is not a mere instructor; he is called to be an apostle, and that call requires an answer of fidelity to God; in other words holiness. .

Thus it is that lay-teachers in our Lasallian institutions are sharers in our mission, companions in our commitment and in our call to holiness via the ministry of teaching.

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3. Is it possible that we ourselves will find a new meaning to brotherliness through our association with lay-teachers?

If these lay-teachers are called to the same mission and apostolate and have to achieve their goals whilst working with us, do they not share in our brotherliness? Do they not have a part in the very same brotherhood that was discovered by De La Salle and the first brothers?

When I read the documentation on our Lasallian family and on those who form it, and when I reflect on our lay-teachers, I often recall that passage in the Acts of the Apostles which tells of St Peter's vision when the Holy Spirit urged him to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles. (Acts 10, 7-16) "Do not call that impure which God has purified". From then on the Gentiles were called to the Kingdom without the slightest discrimination.

Surely those in our teaching establishments who have received God's call to an apostolic mission have to be looked on in the same light. Today the Institute is opening out to them and is telling them to share in the inheritance of De La Salle. Can they possibly be excluded from our brotherhood if they are included in our ministry and our mission?

If we give a clear answer to all those questions and if we decide really to consider as brothers and sisters those lay-teachers who work with us, we have already discovered a new role and depth to the term "brother", and perhaps too a new meaning for our Institute.

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(1) Origins of the Institute. Blain, La Vie de Mr. J. B. De La Salle, 169. Cahiers Lasalliens, n. 7.

(2) Idem, Blain, p. 169.

(3) Blain, 1, 240-241.