



15 - 18 – D - 30

LASALLIAN FAMILY CONCEPT AND THE MALAYSIAN REALITY

Perhaps in a less formal institutionalised way, the Brothers in Malaysia have had different approaches to the development of the Lasallian Family. Almost every school director and Brothers' community have their own circles of friends, benefactors and co-workers. Through our formal contact with them there is imparted some degree of spirituality and educational philosophy.

Lay heads of Brothers' schools have, off and on, "get together" where sharing goes on regarding the specific identity and problems of our schools.

Then again in our schools with fairly active Catholic teachers there exists some coordination in the manner in which faith, values, and spirituality are imparted to our students.

OLD BOYS' ASSOCIATIONS

One feature of the Brothers' Schools which have had a long history has been the establishment of Old Boys' Associations. The more recently founded schools have also worked in the same direction. Their origin stems from the attachment of the former pupils to their Alma Mater and this attachment has its explanation in the tremendous loyalty and affection they had and retain for their former teachers who were Brothers. These Associations, by and large, are thus characterised by this deep attachment and a tremendous interest (and pride) in their former schools, their readiness to help out when called upon to do so. These Associations have always been autonomous and the Brothers do not exercise anything beyond a counselling role but their deference to the Brothers is unmistakable. Since most of the members are not Catholics, or even Christian, the religious dimension is not generally stressed but the moral influence of Christian formation and education is duly appreciated and most desired. These Old Boys' Associations (there are also lady members now by reason of the opening of pre-university classes to girls) are to be considered as genuine members of the Lasallian Family because of their close ties and their association with the support of the Brothers in their educational and social work.

PARENTS – TEACHERS ASSOCIATIONS (P.T.A./P.I.B.G.)

In general, the parents of our pupils have always been interested in the welfare of the Brothers' schools and they too

have been of immense support in their expansion as well as in the general discipline of these establishments. Even before the establishment of formal PTA's by instruction from the Ministry of Education, groups of parents were to be found everywhere and, either individually or in groups, were able to render good services to the Brothers, even with regard to their communities' welfare. Parents who are also members of the Old Boys' Associations proved themselves particularly anxious to be close to the Brothers and helped to strengthen the ties between these Associations and the schools. With the setting up of the PTA for each school, there has been growing interest and support coming from a larger group of parents who now work more closely and with deeper attachment to the respective schools. This has strengthened PTA relations and, in practice, it is these Associations which are quick to detect what the schools need for improvement in facilities and the welfare of the pupils, especially the less advantaged.

Through these Associations, many more parents have come to know the schools better and to take genuine interest in them. Working with the Boards of Governors or Managers of each school, considerable progress has been achieved all-round. In general too, through meetings and discussions with the staff and, especially the Head Teachers, the parents have gradually come to a better understanding of what a Brothers' school is and what it is striving for. As such, the PTA's have greatly improved and cemented the good relations between the Brothers and their schools and the parents and made them true cooperators in the Lasallian enterprise. They constitute thus an important element in the greater Lasallian Family.

LIMITATIONS

However, it must also be noted that in Malaysia, having a political set-up, increasingly manipulated by Islamic elements bordering on fundamentalist principles, within the last 5 - 10 years, there has been a concerted effort to minimise the Christian dimension of our Mission schools. This has been effectively done by the taking over control of students intake, staff transfers, curriculum determination, etc. As such, the number of Catholic students and teachers has been drastically reduced, forcing us to rethink our concept of the Lasallian Christian school. We have fewer lay Catholic teachers to draw from, in our attempt to establish the Lasallian Family.

Till now, many of our schools have been blessed with lay staff who despite being non-Catholic (most of them) are still sufficiently imbued with our Lasallian character. This has been due to a large extent to the fact that some of them were from our teacher-training college which has been closed since the early 70's. Besides this, there is the fact that in the "past", teachers tended to remain for many years in a particular school. So working alongside the Brothers, they inevitably absorbed the identity and traditions that the Brothers so well imparted.

However today, with the frequent transfer of teachers in and out of our schools by the Ministry of Education, longstanding teachers notwithstanding, we face the difficulty of having teachers who are imbued with or who understand our traditions. Teachers come and go before they even have time to

develop any sense of loyalty or association with our Educational Mission.

What has become increasingly evident is also the posting of Muslim teachers into our schools. They, while being cooperative in some instances, may not appreciate fully the Christian dimension of our apostolic work. Many of our schools have more than half the staff Muslims and this phenomenon will continue to increase, as statistics over the last years show that all Teachers' Training Colleges in the country are practically Muslims in enrolment.

SOME BREAKTHROUGHS

Despite these limitations much effort has been given to deepen the commitment of teachers in our schools. At a more organised level, the "colloquium" (staff management programme) run by heads of Mission schools under the umbrella of the GACS (Guild of Assisted Catholic Schools) has conducted many programmes of staff development at our various Mission schools (girls and boys schools). The Brothers have featured most prominently in this movement, comprised of Religious and lay people. These programmes conducted for the staff of our Mission school provide opportunities for orientating our teachers into our own educational philosophy and emphasis. Much has been done, and to date, Staff Animation Teams are still in good demand.

However, the spectre of gloom looms ahead even for an organisation such as the GACS, since of late, there have been clear indications from the Ministry of Education to the effect of discouraging any educational endeavours initiated by groups other than those from the Ministry itself. This, coupled with the fact that many Mission schools are being heavily staffed and administered by Muslims, has somewhat begun to take the wind out of the "colloquium" sails. Nevertheless it will still struggle to carry on until such time when circumstances disallow its continuance.

With these factors in view, the prospects of the Lasallian Family as envisaged in some totally Catholic countries (Spain, the Philippines and the sort) seem less viable. We have neither the numbers of lay teachers to draw from, nor the "Catholic" atmosphere for them to function in. Leaving that aside, even the notion of the "Lasallian School with a Christian identity" is called in question, as Brothers are confronted by students, teachers, personnel and structures that are more than 90% non-Christian.

POSSIBLE INITIATIVES

Despite all this, the Concept of the Lasallian Family is not totally unfeasible. Perhaps workable at a smaller level, say 3-4 Catholic teachers from each school becoming an extended family to the Brothers community, attached to the school, where every now and then, they could be invited for a meal, prayer functions, faith sharing experience or other opportunities where interaction can take place and where we can impart our Lasallian charism to them. They may not even

have to meet always at the Brothers' residences and may prefer to take turns at meeting at one another's houses for a simple meal and animated sharing as practised by ME, BEC, Charismatic groups, etc.

Another possible avenue to develop the Lasallian Family Concept is by tapping the rich source of Catholic teachers found in the parishes. These, more than often, are not from our Mission schools. In this vein there is a need to broaden our concept of the Lasallian Family to include the formation of Catholic teachers and others who will be willing to bring our Educational philosophy and emphasis to Government schools not run by Brothers. If organised efficiently, this move could prove a breakthrough for Christian educational influence into the National Education scene. Brothers could perhaps organise programmes at parish level or even set up appropriate structures for these teachers in order to share with them important aspects of education seen from the Lasallian and Christian perspectives.

Yet another initiative could be to develop closer links and communication with all those teachers who have been trained at our Teachers' Training College which has since been closed. They, above and beyond other Catholic teachers, would be most predisposed to continue carrying on and sharing in our Lasallian Mission.

The Lasallian Family Concept need not be limited to teachers only. At perhaps a different level the inclusion of parents, ex-pupils, male and female, Christian and non-Christian, benefactors and others interested in or who value Lasallian education and character training, human formation, would prove a rich and diversified contribution.

Finally, in a more specific manner, we could set before Catholic teachers, former pupils, parents and even benefactors, the ideal of the SIGNUM FIDEI whose more convinced and more enthusiastic members could publicly consecrate themselves to the Lasallian apostolate in a more specific and wholehearted manner. They could make a commitment to the pursuit of some Lasallian projects and to the expenditure of effort, sacrifices, even monetary help, etc., backed by a strong interior life of prayer, sharing and instruction in Lasallian love. They could form a sort of THIRD ORDER in the broader sense of the term become veritable SIGNUM FIDEI i.e. Signs/witnesses of the faith through Lasallian education.

Not many communities have exploited these possibilities to the full as yet. Perhaps the Sub-District Council could further discuss this matter and come forward with some concrete plan of action that will enable the various communities to explore and actively develop the notion of a Lasallian Family.

Brother Matthew Liew