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ASSOCIATE MEMBERSHIP IN THE INSTITUTE (1/4)

Brother Luke Salm

I. INTRODUCTION

Developments in the Church and in the Institute in the last thirty years have resulted in a breakdown of the barriers that separate the vowed members of the Institute from lay and clerical persons associated with the mission and the tradition of the Institute in a variety of ways. This has resulted in a desire to be more closely tied to the Institute on the part of many who are not, cannot be, or have no vocation to become vowed Brothers. This makes it urgent for the Institute to consider the possibility of some form of membership for such persons for their own benefit and that of the Institute itself. As the average age of the Brothers rises and their numbers decline on the one hand and, on the other, the number of those associated with the Brothers in various ways escalates, it comes down to a question of whether the Institute is becoming smaller or in fact growing larger, perhaps by leaps and bounds. The opportunity of formally opening up the concept of membership now presents itself. The question is complex; and the pages that follow will attempt to set forth the principal issues involved and to suggest some possibilities for action.

II. HISTORICAL SURVEY THE FOUNDER AND THE TRADITION

Although association was an important concept in the charism and the practice of the Founder and the Brothers in the early years of the Institute, that association was limited to the Brothers who were members of the Institute. All the schools were staffed exclusively by Brothers and their communities were closed to outsiders of any kind. The association among the Brothers in the schools was an outgrowth of their early experience in the classroom that put an end to the traditional pattern of the isolated schoolmaster in elementary education. The association of the Brothers in their communities had a different motivation. Separation from «the world» was a major theme in the Founder's spirituality, as it was in the ancient monastic tradition of fuga mundi that found an echo in much of the spirituality of the seventeenth century. Religious consecration was defined in terms of leaving the world to live in community; contact with outsiders, even with one's own family, was considered dangerous to one's vocation and even salvation. On his death bed the Founder could say «If you wish to preserve yourself on your state and to die in it, never have any familiar dealings with people of the world; for little by little you will acquire a liking for their way of acting and will be drawn into conversation so that, through politeness, you will not be able to avoid agreeing with their language, however pernicious. This will cause you to fall into infidelity; and no longer being faithful in observing your Rule, you will grow disgusted with your state, and finally you will abandon it.»

Much as that attitude was a reflection of the times, there were other aspects to the Founder's creative achievement that carried the seeds of a greater openness to bear full fruit, perhaps, only in our own time. For one thing, the Brothers were not and were never to be priests. Their exclusively lay status, albeit in a religious community, established a permanent bond with the laity who today are emerging as a dynamic force for church renewal. The exclusion of the Brothers from the priesthood had two effects: it removed the Brothers from clerical privilege and lifestyle while, at the same time, creating the need for relationships with clerics as chaplains, confessors, patrons and sometimes the owners and sponsors of the educational establishments where the Brothers worked.

It was their religious character that differentiated the Brothers from both seculars and clerics. But even here, the Founder did not set out to found a religious order in the traditional and canonical sense. In his lifetime he did not pursue either legal incorporation or papal approval for his distinctive community. The Brothers were free to remain in the Institute with or without vows; the early Brothers pronounced three vows: a vow of association to conduct gratuitous schools, a vow of stability, and a vow of obedience. These were not the vows traditional in the monastic and mendicant orders, but vows oriented to the educational mission, its flexibility and coherence, and its only guarantee of permanence. Even the habit was designed originally to distinguish the Brothers not only from seculars and priests but also from the monastic congregations. This new way of living a religious life in community, without the pretensions or restrictions of either the clerical or the monastic state provides a basis in the Lasallian tradition for a more open relationship with those who share the educational mission.

It was, however, the separation from the world and the restriction of association to the Brothers that remained the official attitude and practice of the Institute well into the twentieth century. Beginning in the nineteenth century in the schools, however, new apostolic initiatives in the field of education, now exercised worldwide in varied cultural contexts, led to increasing but reluctant employment of lay persons in the Lasallian enterprise. Even as late as the General Chapter of 1946 this could be described as a «necessary evil.» No such compromises were made in the practice of religious and community life however. In fact, the nineteenth century saw an increasing absorption into the Institute of a monastic kind of spirituality. Monastic authors served as sources for spiritual reading and meditation. The Superiors followed the lead of Roman authority as it encouraged a kind of homogenization of religious life, minimizing the distinctive elements in the founding charism, and defining religious life, in the terms of the 1917 Code of Canon Law, as a fixed state expressed in the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience.

The result was a growing dichotomy between the apostolic ministry and religious living in community: the one diversified, contemporary, turned outward and open to change; the other uniform, antiquated, turned inward, and fixed. In the process, the integration that De La Salle espoused between «the duties of state» and «concern for salvation» was compromised. The effect of preserving out of context the letter of some of the Founder's policies and

practices, was to sacrifice the Founder's spirit or, better, his spirituality, his apostolic spirituality, his «mystical realism,» as it has been called. Sacrificed, too, was the integrity of the Brother's vocation, even to the point of considering the ministry to his students and his collaboration with his lay colleagues as a distraction from leading an authentic religious life. A Brother was expected to be attuned to the contemporary world in the school and conform in community to a spirituality and lifestyle inherited from a remote century.

Over the course of the centuries, modifications in the religious habit of the Brothers — the lengthened soutane, abandonment of the wide-brim hat first for the tricorn and then the narrow-brim Roman clerical hat, a lighter mantle, and prominence for the calotte — all tended to blur the distinctiveness of the Brother's habit — and consequent self-understanding — from that of clerics and other religious congregations.

In another direction, during the nineteenth century the Institute began to recognize its dependence on external persons by creating the category of affiliated members, most often conferred on prominent benefactors, especially among the clergy, medical doctors, and providers of financial support. Affiliated members, and later those officially recognized as benefactors, did not necessarily or usually become direct and ongoing participants in the Institute's educational ministry, or its community life and spirituality. Considered as such, this «award» entailed no special obligations and focused for the most part on spiritual benefits both during life and especially after death. At least this was an admission that the Institute was not self-sufficient nor did it have a control over every aspect of its mission and the needs of its personnel.

TRANSITION AND RENEWAL PROMPTED BY VATICAN II

The worldwide dislocations, both geographical and psychological, occasioned by World War II had its impact on Church life in general and religious life in particular some twenty years later with Pope John XXIII and the second Vatican Council. It became the responsibility of the successive General Chapters to apply to the Institute the call for liturgical and biblical renewal, the opening of the Church to the realities of the modern world, the recognition of the role of the laity in church life and their call to holiness, and the renewal of religious life by a return to the Gospel and the charism of the Founder, as well as unprecedented attention to the signs of the times. Fortunately, the Institute had a head start with scholarly studies of the Founder's charism already underway, Brothers being trained in scripture studies and theology, and a committee in place to undertake a thorough revision of the Rule. This preparation made it possible for the Institute in the General Chapters after Vatican II to open itself to the wider world around it, especially to those who wanted a greater share in the mission and in the inheritance of John Baptist de La Salle. It will be useful, then, to trace briefly the decisions of the successive General Chapters relating to this unprecedented movement outward.

THE OPEN STANCE OF RECENT GENERAL CHAPTERS

• The 39th General Chapter 1966-1967

In many ways the renewal 39th General Chapter represented a moment of discontinuity in the history of the Institute. Bypassing the traditions of the recent past, the Chapter tried to recover the dynamism of the original foundation in an effort to integrate the charism and vision of the Founder with the situation and opportunities of the contemporary world. In the process, it became possible to separate out from the Founder's writings and experience those elements that had permanent value and those that were historically and culturally conditioned by the situation in seventeenth century France. This was nowhere more evident than in the Institute's new openness to the world outside itself.

The foundational capitular Declaration entitled The Brother of the Christian Schools in the World Today underlined the importance of integrating the religious and community life of the Brothers with their educational apostolate. It urged that communities be prepared to respond to the needs of people, to see the signs of God present in the world, and to overcome the risk of being closed in on themselves. It urged the schools as well to be open to the life of the world and the Church. Among other new initiatives the Declaration affirmed the positive contribution of lay colleagues in the Brothers' schools and opened up the possibility for Brothers to teach in schools not directed by the Institute. After extended debate, the Chapter accepted and endorsed the reality of co-educational Lasallian institutions. A provisional Rule was adopted that eschewed legalisms in favor of an appeal to values derived from the Gospel and the Founder's charism, adapted to the lived experience of the Institute incarnated in a variety of cultures. A new Book of Government established structures of subsidiarity to make adaptations possible on the local level. In short, the Institute began to realize that it could no longer operate in isolation or impose global uniformity if its mission were to be effective in the contemporary world.

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