

ASSOCIATE MEMBERSHIP IN THE INSTITUTE (2/4)

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• The 40th General Chapter 1976

The principal preoccupations of the 1976 Chapter were two: first, a more thorough overhaul of governmental structures than had been possible ten years earlier, a process that resulted in a totally new Book of Government; second, how to understand religious consecration and the vows in the light of the large numbers of dispensations from vows and departures that followed the shock of renewal, a process that, for various reasons, resulted in nothing very conclusive. But there was another concern that surfaced in the Chapter that was barely noticed at the time.

By 1976 the Chapter was able to take notice of initiatives that were taking place, apart from Institute control, among the former students and the present associates of the Brothers. In the very climate where the number of Brothers was declining there was noted an astounding increase of activity and commitment to Lasallian education on the part of lay persons, especially former students of the Brothers. Among many such movements of a local or regional character, there were two of international proportions that the Chapter was asked to consider. One was the World Federation of Lasallian Alumni (ex-alumni is the term in Europe where enrolled students are called alumni); the other was the Signum Fidei movement.

The movement to organize the worldwide Lasallian alumni associations began as early as 1958 during the International Exhibition held that year in Brussels focused on science and technology. The 23 Lasallian delegations set the stage for the formation of the World Federation of Former Students of the Brothers. The statutes were approved at the second world congress held in Rome in 1960 with 36 delegations present. The third world congress held at Barcelona in 1965 drew over 2000 alumni from 50 countries as well as many Brothers including Brother Nicet, the Superior General. There were 1300 present at the world congress at Montreal in 1967, with Brother Charles Henry, SG, presiding. Brother Pablo, then Vicar General, attended the fifth congress at Buenos Aires in 1972 with 2500 in attendance. This congress was notable for the number of young people present, who soon formed themselves into the International Union of Young Lasallians. The initiative and organization of these congresses, as well as the gatherings held by the related local and regional associations, was largely the work of the lay participants themselves. What had begun as a federation of associations of former students would from now on be known as the International Lasallian Confederation.

Aware of the significance of these movements, Brother Charles Henry took the initiative to form a «Mixed Committee,» as it was called, composed of five Brothers (three of them Assistants) and four lay leaders of the

associations. The committee presented its report on the chapter floor, noting that «not only are former students members [of the Federation], but also the lay teachers, parents of the boys, young people of both sexes, pupils in their last year and all those interested in the Christian Schools.» The report asks the Institute «to consider the associations as a specific field of the apostolic mission and to work for the promotion of a more intense Christian and apostolic life in its members in keeping with the degrees of personal commitment of the associates, a commitment ranging from a constant attitude of cordial sympathy to the total gift of self for the better service of Christian education.» In this report and in all the activities of the association there is expressed a strong desire, not only to be recognized as participants in the educational mission, but also to integrate the apostolate with a living spirituality in the spirit of De La Salle (Bulletin of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, henceforth BBCS, 218).

A second group that had emerged during the ten year interval between chapters had been founded by Brother Paulus Adams, the Belgian Assistant, and had adopted the name «Signum Fidei.» Unlike the associations, membership in this group demanded a high degree of commitment in all its members. Its members «seek a spirituality based on that of St. John Baptist de La Salle. They want a Lasallian way of life to turn themselves into a better sign of faith in their respective walks of life.» They are aware that the spirit calls them «to bind themselves by a special vow to undertake, animate, and defend a spiritual education by all means available, and especially by the testimony of a personal consecrated life.» Members are «people in the most diverse professions and different walks of life; men and women, married and single, adults and adolescents» (BBCS, 215). In some ways this movement began to resemble either a kind of «third order» related to the Institute or, better perhaps, a secular Institute derived from the Brothers' Institute, similar to the Union of Catechists of Jesus Crucified and Mary Immaculate founded by Brother Teodoro in Milan, formally recognized as a canonical secular institute in 1949.

The Chapter witnessed an impressive ceremony as 12 members of Signum Fidei made their act of consecration during a Eucharistic celebration at which all the capitulants were present. The group comprised three married couples, 4 laymen, one laywoman, and a priest. Five were from Spain, three from Belgium, two from Italy, and the lay woman was from France. It is worth quoting their act of consecration to see the possibilities for developing degrees of association with the Institute:

Most Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, prostrate with most profound respect before your infinite and adorable majesty, I consecrate myself entirely to you to procure your glory as far as I am able and as you will require of me.

For which purpose I unite myself to the members of Signum Fidei to promote, sustain, and defend with them an integrated education founded on the person of Christ, in favor of young people and especially for those furthest removed from salvation in the spirit of St. John Baptist de La Salle.

I intend to manifest this promise in an educational scheme for the realization of which I will work either alone or with a group by all the means in my power, with the help of the Holy spirit and following the example of the Virgin Mary.

I promise to make the Gospel and its law of love the supreme rule of my whole life. And therefore agree to follow the way of Life of the Signum Fidei association to which I firmly hold. ROME 5 June 1976.

The presentation to the Chapter by the Mixed Committee

and the Signum Fidei ceremony both occurred on the same day. It must be said that, preoccupied with important issues still to be addressed in the short time remaining, the capitulants seemed to consider these sessions as an interesting diversion but without significant impact on the business of the Chapter itself. At that moment in history, the shortage of Brothers and the advancing age of the membership, although considered alarming, had not yet become sufficiently acute to motivate a search for alternatives to renewed efforts for vocations to the Institute. The delegates from the United States in particular were inclined to view these associations as designed for and relative to European cultures and not likely to find enthusiastic response among the Brothers in the United States. The Brothers who had been promoting and accompanying these associations, however, found encouragement to work for the growth of these movements. Brother Pablo, the Superior General, very soon after the close of the Chapter that elected him, lent his support and his presence to the sixth World Congress held at Malta in August 1976. From this time on, the Spanish, under the moderatorship of Brother Manuel Olivé, assumed a leadership role in the Lasallian associations.

Meanwhile a development, circumscribed locally but with a wider potential, was the attempt in France to found a Lasallian third order that had as its objectives a close structural union with the Institute and the school; sharing in the Brothers' mission; living in an «open,» i.e. mixed, community; and an adequate form of consecration.

From that time on the expression «the Lasallian Family» began to enjoy currency in Institute literature and dialogue.

• The 41st General Chapter 1986

The principal business before the 1986 Chapter was the adoption of a definitive version of the Rule after revisions made in the light of the required twenty years of experience with a provisional text. In the Chapter of the revised Rule on the Mission of the Institute there is a section on the Shared Mission affirming that the Brothers «gladly» associate lay persons with them in the educational mission, that they co-operate in forming Christian teachers, that in the educational community «all the functions, including positions of responsibility are shared.» The Brothers are to offer to those who desire it, a more intensified sharing of Lasallian spirituality, «encouraging such persons to make a more specific apostolic commitment» (Arts 17 - 17d). In the Chapter entitled The Vitality of the Institute, a lengthy article sees the growth of the various Lasallian movements as «a grace from God,» and recognizes that the Institute can «associate with itself lay people who want to lead the life of perfection that the Gospel demands, by living according to the spirit of the Institute and by participation in its mission. The Institute is to help these persons and movements «achieve their proper autonomy» while it «creates appropriate ties with them.»

After the body of the Chapter, acting through the various commissions, had made its contribution to the revision of the Rule, the Rule Commission was entrusted with preparing the final text. The rest of the capitulants were formed into new commissions to deal with topics that had surfaced as needed to be addressed. One of these topics concerned the Lasallian family.

A message to the Lasallian Family was hastily put together and passed by the Chapter after much discussion. The General Council was entrusted with the task of developing a more thoroughly researched and nuanced message, which was published in February 1989.

These «messages» reveal how complex the reality called the Lasallian Family had become, a «family» including the Brothers, members of educational communities, women's groups (Lasallian Sisters), lay groups inspired by the Founder, young Lasallians, parents, students, friends, especially affiliated members and benefactors, as well as the local and international Lasallian federations. In this diversity, there were two major tendencies that surfaced in the associated groups: one based on sharing the mission either directly or indirectly; the other, while also devoted to the mission, expressing a desire for closer union with the Institute, for a more intense community and spiritual life expressed in some form of consecration. These developments raised concerns about the role of the Brothers and the leadership in the Institute, the unique character of the Brothers' vocation, traditional norms of religious community life as contrasted with the lifestyle of apostolic communities composed of men and women, religious and lay persons.

In the face of all this complexity the messages have a tentative tone. The stress is on recognizing and preserving diversity while aiming for cooperation in association; leaving the organizational initiative to the associations, while promising Institute help and support when requested; making available to everyone the various programs in Lasallian studies and formation; greater initiative and cooperation at the local level.

Another significant decision of the 1986 Chapter was to restore the language of the foundational Brothers' vow of association in a renewed form as «association for the service of the poor through education.» Post-capitular reflection and discussions began to raise the question of whether the «together and by association» in the vow formula should be restricted to the Brothers or, as many urged, was a reality describing the relationship between the Brothers and those with whom they share the Lasallian mission. Could persons who are not Brothers but seem gifted with some sort of Lasallian vocation express their own commitment in the same language? In this way the language of association began to be tied to Lasallian family issues.

These chapter documents and decisions contributed significantly to the growth of the various Lasallian movements that were already underway. Brother Genaro, the newly-elected Vicar General, took an official and personal interest in strengthening the Lasallian Family movements, especially in Italy and in the Latin countries. In the Philippines, the Signum Fidei movement took hold and emerged as the center of growth for these groups of committed and consecrated lay associates. In addition to the Guadalupanas Lasallian Sisters founded in Mexico, similar groups of Sisters were formed in Thailand and Vietnam. The Institute of Brothers could no longer ignore the reality of their association in a worldwide Lasallian family of diverse persons and groups in a diversity of cultures.

The new reality was made graphically evident in a video produced by the Pacific-Asian Region in which Buddhists, both men and women, were shown actively engaged with the Brothers in the Lasallian mission and equally committed to a spirituality integrating Lasallian elements with their own religious traditions. This video, directed by Brother Miguel Rapatan, was viewed widely just prior to the upcoming General Chapter, not only in the PARC Region, but in Rome and other Lasallian centers. It had a profound impact on all those who saw it and was not without influence on the delegates to the 1993 Chapter.

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