

**For a better understanding
of the lasallian association (1/6)**

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(This text is a talk given to the Administrators of the French Lasallian Centers of the ALS (La Salle Association) in November 18th and 19th 1998).

I have been asked to introduce this time of formation on the lasallian association. To do that, I must first recall what it meant at the beginning of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. As a foreword to this talk I would make three points on the parameters of my proposal with regard to the aim of these two days. For you, who are heads of establishments and responsible for educational institutions under a lasallian trusteeship, this aim is to live out the association better today.

* So, my first point is that I will stick to the meaning of the word association, and the realities that it had in the founding experience of J.B. de La Salle and his first Brothers. I shall thus at least go some way to addressing the sub-titles given in the programme: History, Origins, Characteristics. – It is not possible, however, even to sketch out a development which would relate to another sub-title: «Experiences 'in the course of history'». Since I have not studied this question, I am not even certain of fully understanding what it means. The formula of vows made by the Brothers has for three hundred years, certainly retained a promise of association. But when it is a question of being precise about the content of the religious consecration, the vow of association had disappeared after 1726. The General Chapter of 1986 – and the Rule of 1987, wanted to restore it: I have no intention of speaking of this restoration. However, I hope that it was only the germ of a much more radical renewal.

* My second introductory point touches on a difficulty which appears to me more serious: I wonder if my presentation will do justice to the suggested title: For a better understanding of the lasallian association? I shall strictly limit myself to calling to mind the period of the origins of the Institute. In that way I shall place myself in a human, social, ecclesial context which we find in our enlightened times: the differences will be obvious, I think, as I proceed with this talk. To limit myself from the start to a single, general fact: John Baptist de La Salle and his Brothers grew up in a Christian world. We live in a secular world, it is a truism to say so. But what makes an almost uncrossable gulf between him and us, is that *we ourselves are certainly still more imbued with secularisation.*

It invades our thinking, our behaviour, our values, almost without our realising it. This is a fact, not a judgement, because I think that, in the main, secularisation is an inescapable social fact and an inroad into the faith. I fear, then, that my words may be greatly «disorientating», or may seem anachronistic to you, since the association lived and concei-

ved by John Baptist and the first Brothers was specific, situated, and so limited – with regard to the list of workshops for the second day, for example. John Baptist de La Salle could provide no answer to any of the questions we are asking ourselves.

My last introductory point bears on *three methodological propositions* :

– The first concerns the vocabulary. I have not studied it in depth. I am simply pointing out that the term *association* is found only seven times in the lasallian writings. They are found in the context of the vow which I am going to speak of. The term *Society* is used much more frequently: 92 times.

In what concerns our point, the words *Society and Institute* are used interchangeably by John Baptist de La Salle, for example in the primitive *Rule* (1718 text) in which the first article reads precisely: *The Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools is a Society in which profession is made of keeping schools gratuitously.*

– The second methodological point: to treat the subject suggested to me, restricted though it is, I need to refer to the lasallian foundation sequence as a whole. In spite of my efforts to be sufficiently explicit, there are some references that you may find too allusive. Please bear with me, and the talk will give some clarification.

– The last methodological point: to write this presentation I have re-read the two fundamental studies of Br. Maurice Hermans very thoroughly: his work of 1961 on *The vows of the Brothers of the Christian Schools before the Bull of Benedict XIII* (that is from 1686 to 1726) – and his thesis published in 1962 : *The Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools seeking canonical status: from its beginning (1679) to the Bull of Benedict XIII (1725)*. (1) The two articles entitled *Association* (2), which appeared in the 1st volume of *Themes Lasalliens* add hardly anything to Br. Maurice Herman's contribution, so far as our subject is concerned.

In a more historical first section, I shall recall the main stages of the association in the lasallian foundation. A second section will attempt to go deeper into the sense and the implications of the lasallian Association from its beginnings.

First Part:

**The stages of the association in the
Lasallian Foundation.**

I shall take three of them

**1 - Before the association, the project for lasallian
Community (1679-1689)**

To recall the reason for the lasallian project, and the stages of its realisation between 1680 and 1690, I will remind you of four dates.

1680: JBS came first by chance, then unwillingly, into closer and closer contact with the first schoolmasters employed by Nyel. With an awareness that grew clearer each day, that he had of the situation, he realised *that the burgeoning schools were not producing the results hoped of them, because no uniform guidance was being maintained* (3); *each master followed his own particular spirit without concerning himself with what might bring about greater success*

(4). To ensure the success of the popular schools in Rheims, first of all an educative community for the masters needed to be formed: to this end, JBS brought the masters together, made them live together, and taught them how to harmonise their pedagogical practices. He accompanied them by drawing closer to them, going so far as to take them into his house. Almost simultaneously he was aware of the need to unite them as well in a community which was evangelical in intention and style.

1682: The founding project of JBS, seen in his *radical choice* at the end of 1682 and beginning of 1683. His heart-rending and liberating decision at the end of 1682, was henceforth to devote his existence as a priest, to the establishment and guidance of a community of lay-people – committed by an evangelical vocation – to an ecclesial «ministry» – realised in the largely secular «career» of schoolmasters – gratuitous schools which they kept as a group in the diocese of Rheims – for the children of the people, the labourers and the poor, who up to then had been denied access to culture and the gospel. Making a slight change to the remark I made about the world of Christianity in which the life of JBS unfolded, I would note without insisting on it, that the priest that he was, passed from being a Church in himself to a Church become incarnate in the world. He used to spend six hours a day in the Cathedral, his preferred society was among the bourgeois people of the Church. He immersed himself into a community of schoolmasters, he shared in their material insecurity, he spent hours discovering from the inside, the base realities of their profession, with the aim of improving their professional quality. The school had to function well if it was to contribute to the salvation of the young people who had been abandoned up to then. His radical evangelical option led the ex-canon into a kind of secularisation in his new way of living the priestly ministry.

1686: The founding project of JBS and his companions, seen in the *first Assembly* of Masters in 1686: that this community «should take itself in hand»; that starting from the life of its members, it should define its identity and determine the important elements of its kind of existence. That is what happened in the debates of that Assembly. The Brothers took a decision together on the choice of an original habit, a change of title (from *masters*, to *brothers*), on an outline of a rule. At the end of the Assembly, those who henceforth called themselves Brothers of the Christian Schools, pronounced a vow of obedience, (which could be understood as a vow of community togetherness).

1688-1689: The founding project seen in the decision taken by JBS to answer a call from Paris : a community without «boundaries» (diocesan) or guarantees (ecclesiastical); a community which retained its unity by defending its internal autonomy (cf. *Memorandum on the habit*, 1689, which uses the expression *Community* 40 times, sometimes to refer to the small local community, more often to speak of all the Brothers in the region of Rheims and of Paris).

So all through these stages, *the words association and society do not appear in the lasallian language.*

2 Towards association: the crisis of 1690 and the first vow of association of 21st November 1691.

2.1 An absolute crisis at the end of the 80s

It had already been fifteen years since he had put his hand to this thorny work, which he watered with sweat and tears.

His work did not progress much, however. With every stone he laid in the building of this edifice, he found a new obstacle and while his charitable hand was building it, often at great expense, another malicious and evil hand was destroying and demolishing it. (Blain 1, 311).

– *Crisis in the undertaking – Rheims:* disintegration. The training school for village schoolmasters disappeared almost immediately. The seminary of young Brothers followed JBS to Paris, but the young men, employed in serving at Masses in St Sulpice, lost their fervour and left. – *Paris:* difficult beginnings for the school. The Brothers had to work with their predecessors, and the pedagogical aims were at variance. When the Brothers took charge of the schools, they were successful, but their success antagonised the previous masters in charge; hoodwinked, the parish priest of St Sulpice considered sending away JBS and his companions (in September 1688). When his eyes were opened he thought twice about it and his successor, Baudrand, even suggested opening a second school in the rue du Bac. This expansion upset the corporate body of Paris schoolmasters: they feared for their future and began unceasing attacks.

– *Crisis in the community,* more serious: Departures: eight out of sixteen Brothers in Rheims, and two out of four in Paris. Without being replaced by new members.- Lassitude: physical, moral and spiritual among those who stayed. JBS's illness which took him to death's door. Death of Br. Henri L'Heureux on whom JBS was building high hopes. – Threats on the internal autonomy of the community: Baudrand wanted to impose an ecclesiastical habit on the Brothers. JBS was firmly opposed. So he drew up (at the end of 89, beginning of 90) the document called *Mmoire sur l'habit*: he was defending not so much an original dress, but the principle of internal autonomy in the community, and the independence of its self-government, in relation to ecclesiastical powers. This was to be a fundamental issue throughout JBS's life and throughout innumerable conflicts.

– *Personal crisis for the «forty year old man.»* He seemed to have failed at every level.- He was disappointed by the men in whom he had trusted, Brothers, clergy, lay-people, the young. From 1682, JBS had resolutely set his life on a new path, accepting a radical break to this end. At the age of forty, this new path seemed to reach a dead end. To describe his state of soul, the biographer here uses the word *perplexity*:

This was the sad situation in which the pious teacher found himself at the end of 1690, after so many crosses and so much persecution, after so many apparent successes, he found himself in almost the same situation that he had been in ten years previously, with few Brothers, making hardly any progress in his work and fearful of seeing it perish (Blain, 1, 312).

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(1) *Cahiers Lasalliens* 2-3 (140 and 96 pages) and 11 (414 pages) respectively.

(2) *Thmes Lasalliens* 1-6. *Association*. Br. Mario Presciuttini, 6A *L'Association comme style de vie et d'action* (p.57-63)- Br. Rodolfo Andaur, 6B *L'Association dans les textes fondateurs* (p. 64-72).

(3) MC 24, MR 23-24. Parallel account in Blain 1, 169-180.

(4) MR 24.