

**For a better understanding
of the lasallian association (2/6)**

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2.2 The first Vow of Association, of 21st November, 1691.

At this time of absolute crisis, when John Baptist de La Salle's group of companions was dangerously weakened, when the survival of the community was in doubt, the Founder sought to ward off this death threat by an act of recreative hope. It was the vow of association between M. de La Salle and two Brothers.

MOST HOLY TRINITY, Father Son and Holy Spirit, prostrate with the most profound respect before your infinite and adorable Majesty, WE CONSECRATE OURSELVES ENTIRELY TO YOU TO PROCURE as far as we are able and with all our care the establishment of the Society of the Christian Schools in the manner which seems to us to be most pleasing to you and the most favourable to the said society.

AND, FOR THIS PURPOSE, I, John Baptist de La Salle, priest, I, Nicholas Vuyart and I, Gabriel Drolin, from now on and for ever, until our dying breath, or until the complete end of the establishment of the said society, make a vow of association and union to bring about and maintain the said establishment, without the possibility of our leaving, even were we to remain the only three in the said society, and were we obliged to seek alms and to live on bread alone.

WHEREFORE we promise to do unanimously and by common agreement, all that we believe in conscience and without any human consideration to be for the greatest good of the said society.

AS A MARK OF WHICH WE HAVE SIGNED, Done this 21st November, day of the Presentation of the Most Blessed Virgin, 1691.

In this formula of commitment, we find four parts to the structure.

A transcendent step. The formula of vows opens by addressing the Trinity which directs the whole content of the commitment. It was God who had committed JBS to an educational vocation. The certainty of this vocation received from God does not seem to have deserted him: no matter how dark the night, he determined to follow the same path, but to forge ahead he relied on this interior certainty – And it was God's work that he was doing. He could not give it up. The living God who had been there at the start, who was ever present in that night and spoke to the heart would always be at hand: he would continue to call to creative work and would give the necessary strength and light to answer positively. In this sense the lasallian step is truly sublime, an act of theological hope.

A sublime, incarnate step : And, for this purpose : I ..., I ..., and I ... make a vow of association ... to . The act of hope was already translated into a vow of association between M. de La Salle and two Brothers. It was a hope that rested on human signs: Brothers had remained, these two among them: how could he abandon them when they had dedicated their lives with him. How could he abandon those young people, the poor for whom his commitment and those of the Brothers had caused hope of freedom to well up:

His cause was that of the poor and the public ... it concerned their interests alone and not his own; after taking up the responsibility of instructing ignorant and pitiful youth, he could not, without being cowardly and pusillanimous, return them to their original ignorance and poor education (Blain 1, 296).

The vow of a project: Wherefore we promise to do ... This commitment has been seen as envisaging «the establishment of the Society». Vow of a project, vow of a community discernment. Prophetic vow of a Visionary, who speaks to share with others, and their common word becomes effective action. In the formula of the vow, what was said was already being carried out; the vow began to put into reality what it proclaimed: the future of the little community was threatened. And yet Monsieur de La Salle is more than ever aware of the urgent need to educate the more marginalised young people. He saw that his historical mission was to bring into the Church and town a new religious Society consecrated to human development and the evangelisation of young people who were not faceless and nameless for him. John Baptist refused to contemplate the collapse of what he had undertaken. He simply stopped with what remained of it. To two of the Brothers who had remained faithful, he suggested anticipating the Society he dreamed of, to become co-founders of the association, committing themselves from then on by vow which would bind them together to the life, till death. In the trial, his visionary dream converted the future into a project: ***for the future is not what will happen, but what we are doing today in order to keep the promise of salvation glimpsed by those young people received into the Brothers' schools.***

The vow of a new departure, an act of hope today, starting from yesterday for tomorrow (memory and hope): this 21st day of November, 1691 ... 1691 was not an absolute beginning. For JBS and the other two Brothers, the vow gathered together in the mind the totality of the human experience bearing a religious experience: fraternity, service, struggles. – The vow of 1691: an act which relaunched hope there and then. It was not simply a ratification of the past, the vow reinforced the decisive manner of an outline which had first been lived through. People affirm themselves and through that, build themselves up. The community told itself about its project and in that way brought it into being. – The vow of 1691 opened that experience to a future of action. The vow outlined a precise plan but not a rigid one. It did not impose defined obligations that simply had to be observed; in this way it expressed fidelity as a search to be carried out rather than a heritage to be passed on. A fortiori the essence of this did not contain any prohibition, but it was constituted by a concrete desire to find good through perceiving it on a community level.

In fact, the mystical boost expressed and strengthened in the vow of association was not dissipated in an ethereal religious feeling, any more than it revelled in sterile nostalgia. The consecration to the transcendent God opened John Baptist de La Salle and the others to a period of intense creativity, of realistic planning to bring about what it foretold. This fertile tension between a mystical uplifting towards God and being firmly rooted in the reality of responsible actions, appeared first of all in a remarkable way in the formula itself, in terms which would not be found again, unfortunately:

TO PROCURE as far as we are able and with all our care, the establishment of the Society of the Christian Schools in the manner which SEEMS TO US to be the most pleasing TO YOU and the most favourable to the said society.

Blain, moreover, presents the vow as one of the elements in an overall plan, produced by the situation and experience, and whose fulfilment was binding:

After greatly reflecting on the means of properly shoring up an edifice which was threatening to fall down even as it was being built, he was inspired: 1. To associate himself with the two Brothers whom he considered the most appropriate to bolster the burgeoning community, and to bind them with him by an irrevocable commitment, to further its establishment. 2. To seek a decent house near Paris for bringing back to health the tired and sick Brothers. 3. To gather all his children there during the school holidays, and to keep them sheltered there, to give them back, as in their first fervour, the spirit and grace of their state ... 4. To set up a Novitiate to form the subjects. (Blain, 1, 312).

3. The constitution, the consolidation and the confirmation of the association.

Three dates, three symbolic and effective word actions: The central and cardinal text for understanding the lasallian association was that of *the vow of 6th June, 1694*. Its immediate significance was clarified by *the election* the next day, *7th June, 1694*. Prior to this, its range was made clearer by *the secret commitment by the vow of 21st November, 1691* (above). Afterwards, twenty years later, at a time when we might wonder whether he was not tempted to abandon the Institute, John Baptist de La Salle was invited by a letter from his Brothers (1st April, 1714) to resume a lived awareness of the association which they had established among themselves.

3.1. The Vow of 6th June, 1694, Foundation of the Association

From Pentecost Sunday to Trinity Sunday, 6th June, 1694, John Baptist de La Salle had gathered twelve Brothers in Vaugirard. He had chosen them himself from among the members of what he called up to then the community of the Christian Schools (about thirty Brothers at the most). During this week, the Brothers and their founder made a retreat. At the same time they constituted a decision-making assembly: it was the first General Chapter of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. The avowed aim of the Founder was to consolidate his young community by the definitive consecration to God of these twelve Brothers: it was on the content and the meaning of this step that their exchanges centred during that week; it was for this religious commitment that they prepared themselves in prayer. In fact, the Archives of the Institute retain the thirteen manuscript formulae of the consecration by which these twelve Brothers promised and vowed to unite themselves and to live in society with one another and with John Baptist de La Salle to keep together and by association gratuitous schools. We even have the formula completely written by the hand of M. de La Salle. Three remarks about this formula:

A. The undertaking of John Baptist de La Salle had started in Rheims fifteen years earlier, in 1679. It was not the first making of vows in the young lasallian community. But it was the first formula of vows of which the text has come down to us independently of Blain's account. It was then that *the expression Society made its appearance*, to designa-

te the group of Brothers of the Christian Schools (5).

B. Since then we have kept the structure of the formula of vows up to the present day, in four particulars:

* The invocation of the Trinity and the expression of a total consecration to God to procure his glory:

MOST HOLY TRINITY, Father Son and Holy Spirit, prostrate with the 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.

* The stating of the aim and the content of the association (opened by the phrase: and for this purpose):

AND FOR THIS PURPOSE, I, John Baptist de La Salle, priest, promise and VOW TO UNITE MYSELF AND TO LIVE IN SOCIETY WITH THE BROTHERS (twelve names are appended) TO KEEP, TOGETHER AND BY ASSOCIATION GRATUITOUS SCHOOLS, wherever it may be, even where I obliged to beg alms and to live on bread alone, or to do anything in the said society at which I shall be employed, whether by the body of this society or by the superiors who will have charge of it.

The spelling out of the vows made (beginning by wherefore):

WHEREFORE, I PROMISE AND VOW obedience as well to the body of the society as to the superiors, which vows of association and of stability in the said Society and of obedience, I promise to keep inviolably all my lifetime.

* The ratification of the signature (as witness of which):

AS WITNESS OF WHICH, I HAVE SIGNED, done at Vaugirard this sixth day of June, feast of the Most Holy Trinity in the year one thousand six hundred and ninety-four. Signed De La Salle.

The commitment of association and the definition of its content, formed the core of this formula. And its structure reveals both the Christian, sublime and incarnate source of this association and its priority with regard to the detail of the commitments by vow (which have been made in different ways over the past 300 years).

C. **The Institute is this very association**, being made thanks to the free joining of persons who, in the faith, answer by the consecration of their lives, to a call from the living God, who gathers these people together by the power of an aim and a plan which are inseparably «mystical and «historic».

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(5) Cf. Maurice Auguste, *Les vœux des Frères des écoles chrétiennes avant la Bulle d'approbation. Cahiers Lasalliens 2*, pages 37-42. *L'Institut des FEC à la recherche. Cahiers Lasalliens 11*: Society: use of the noun in the Lasallian texts, 51; 51, 4; the saint and two Brothers form a S. of three in 1691, 54, 54,3.- Societies of common life. Some examples in the XVIIc, 5-6; 5,6-8; 6,1-8; a promise, an oath, a tacit commitment, one or several vows bind their members, 6, 6,6-8. – The vow of association, 190-191; 190,4; 191, 1-5; the vow of teaching gratuitously is prior to the publication of the petition of 1722, 189-192; 189,4; 190, 1-4; 191,1-6; 192,1-5; this same vow is not mentioned in the *Abrgs* of 1722, 193; 193,1; differences between the texts from Paris and the texts worked out in Rome, 157. See whole table, p. 441: juridical character of the vows, duration, the vows taken or not by the Brothers establish a criteria to distinguish the members of the Institute, 77 All that would have to be taken up closely.