

**For a better understanding
of the lasallian association (3/6)**

Brother Michel SAUVAGE

3.2. The act of election of 7th June, 1694: An important juridical expression of the Association.

In the thinking of John Baptist de La Salle, the association would not be fully realised until the day a Brother, a layman, took charge. So the Founder tried, from the day after the vow of 6th June, 1694, to hasten the progress of the group to this end. The Assembly was lengthened by a session of election of the superior of the society. Twice the voters elected Monsieur de La Salle. However, this forced step was not a vain coup. The thirteen associates in fact drew up an act of election of the Superior of the Society, of which we still have the manuscript. The wording of this text makes evident, with forceful insistence, the central importance of the association for the collective identity of this group:

Having associated ourselves with M. John Baptist de La Salle, priest, to keep together and by association gratuitous schools, by the vows which we made yesterday,

We recognise that in consequence of the vows and of the association which we have formed by them, we have chosen as Superior Monsieur John Baptist de La Salle.

Our intention being that after him, in the future and for evermore, there shall be nobody received among us, nor chosen as Superior, who is a priest or in sacred orders, and we shall not have nor admit any superior who is not associated and who has not made the vow we have and as all others who will be associated with us in the future.

[The commitment of association was an expression of the awareness of the identity of the group of Brothers. The act of election reaffirmed this identity, clarified one of the fundamental aspects (the lay character of the Institute) and drew powerful consequences from it with regard to the desire for autonomy in the very young Society. M. de La Salle's attempt had, apparently, failed, since he remained superior of the society. But everything had changed, because he was now superior, not because he was the Founder, but, at least formally, by virtue of the free choice of the associates].

3.3. The letter of the Brothers to JBS on 1st April, 1714: the power of the association in an absolute crisis

Our Very dear Father...

We the principal Brothers of the Christian Schools, Having in mind the greater glory of God, the greatest good of the Church and of our Society, Recognise that it is of extreme importance that you take up again the care

and general guidance of God's holy work which is also your own. Since it has pleased the Lord to use you to establish and guide it for so long.

Everyone is convinced that God gave you and gives you the necessary graces and talents to govern this new company well, which is so useful to the Church and it is only just that we witness to the fact that you have always led it with great success and edification.

That is why we beg you very humbly and we order you in the name and on behalf of the Body of the Society to which you have promised obedience, to take care without delay of the general guidance of our Society.

In witness of which we have signed, Done in Paris this 1st April, 1714. And we are with the most profound respect, our very dear Father, your very humble and very obedient inferiors..

Another crisis in which the Institute seemed threatened to die again. The Founder had left Paris and seemed to have abandoned his task of Superior. The living force of the association moved a certain number of Brothers to hold an Assembly. And they decided to recall their Founder. By a Letter which was an act, they begged M. de La Salle, they even ordered him to take up again the general government of [their] Society. This unusual step was based on their association (even if the vow which was invoked was that of obedience to the body of the Society) (6).

In 1691, De La Salle had reacted against a mortal crisis by an effective beginning of the association which he planned; it would take flesh by the vow of 1694. By the heroic vow, De La Salle gave birth to the association.

In 1714, the association reacted to a mortal crisis by re-expressing itself; it took flesh again by the Assembly of the Brothers and by the Letter to the Founder. The association brought De La Salle to a new birth in his vocation.

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Second Part:

The sense and the implications of the Lasallian Association in the Beginning

The Formula of vows of 1694 expressed an experience which had already been lived for more than ten years in Rheims (and the area around) and in Paris. Very early on De La Salle had been aware of the necessity of gathering the masters into a teaching and even evangelical community. He gradually accepted that God's work for him would be to give himself up entirely to this foundation; he had taken the decision in a radical way in 1682. He gave new impetus to his decision by the vow of 21st November, 1691.

The association of Brothers, as a «plan» and as a progressive realisation became «the powerful reality of the life of the Founder». The vow of 1694 relaunched the project and consolidated its realisation. The strength and depth of the «action in word» represented by the commitment of the vow of 1694, can be measured by the crisis of the years around 1710.

But what was this association? An important reflection first of all:

4. A vow of society before being and in order to be a vow of community.

Then an attempt to bring together the elements or the essential characteristics of the association starting with three facts expressed by the following three propositions:

5. It was an association which was seen BY keeping schools together.
6. It was an association OF Brothers.
7. It was an association FOR the Evangelisation of abandoned youth.

4. A vow of Society before being, and IN ORDER to be, a vow of Community.

I thought I had written the final text of this expos in mid-September. The ideas I am going to attempt now came to me after various meetings, sometimes lengthy, always intense, which I had the opportunity of having in October, with several members of the lasallian network. These meetings ranged from two gatherings of lay-people to an evening with very dear friends, heads of institutions, and, in between, the reading of the advance lasallian educational plan – the stay, at the height of the students strike, in a community of Brothers, several of whom are involved in an educational establishment – and the defence of a thesis on Saint John Baptist de La Salle presented in Lyon by a layman, who is currently a head of an establishment. To be truthful, the initial germ of this new development had been sown in the first text of this expos, drafted in July. I had disposed of it because it had seemed vague at the time, and I have not forgotten the words of Cardinal Garrone at the time of the 1966 General Chapter: *everything that is vague is useless*. Before that the Cardinal had said: *everything that is clear is false*. I hope that this preliminary is useful, while remaining sufficiently true.

I am expressing this preliminary thought in three points: The vow of association which JBS and his twelve companions pronounced on 6th June, 1694 was a vow of «Society» rather than a vow of «Community» - However, this vow committed the members of the Society that it made a reality and shaped, to communities placed in a locality to keep one school, together. The novelty of the vow of 1694 was to demonstrate and restart a fertile tension between «to keep, together» and «to be associated». If you prefer, a fertile tension between «local Community» and «Institute».

4.1. The vow of 6th June, 1694, was primarily a vow of «Society» rather than a vow of «community»

Those who made it in 1694, belonged to different communities. They committed themselves to form a society among themselves, in which each would have the position assigned to him by the body or by his superiors, and in the place to which he would be sent. The society would strengthen the bonds and enlarge the horizons of the limited teams which, locally, together kept a school, and to that end lived together in community. Twelve only, out of about thirty probably, in 1694 and this distinction remained in the Institute until 1923.

The vow of 1694 represented a decisive step forward in the realisation of the lasallian plan. JBS had initially wanted to promote pedagogical, educative and evangelical communities. The crisis of 1690 showed him the fragility of his work. But he saw it as growing pains: it was no longer limited to one diocese, his vocation became national, and rapidly international. It was important that the requirements of a strong local presence should not exhaust the energy, nor li-

mit the horizons of the members of each community. It was vital that the inevitable dispersal resulting from expansion should be counterbalanced by a strong feeling of belonging to a reality which inspired and sustained the concrete incarnation because it transcended it by reminding it of its aim and spirit.

4.2. The vow of 1694 committed the members of the Society which it made a reality and shaped, to communities placed in a locality to keep one school, together.

For a particular Brother, it was certainly locally that what constituted the aim of the association (to keep schools **gratuitously**) was going to be a reality, after being originally in the Brothers' community. And it was certainly the association represented most often by the superior who had charge of it which was going to gather Brothers to «keep, together» a gratuitous school. That is all explicit in the formula of the vow.

4.3. The novelty of the vow of 1694 was to demonstrate and restart a fertile tension between «to keep, together» and «to be associated». If you prefer, a fertile tension between «local Community» and the «Institute» or «Society»

The distinction between «to be associated» and «to keep, together» seems clear to me, and I don't think it is wrong. It seems useful to me, and I hope it is not purely for my intellectual comfort. I do not believe there is any superfluity between the expressions «together» and «by association». In lasallian language, the word *together* appears 160 times. It is used to designate the concrete, local community: its members live together, pray together, relax together, go to school together, etc. Fortunately, some rare writings of EMO and Meditations, bring out the spiritual sense of what may also be source and expression of communion in the presence of God. Without further commentary on this persistent repetition of the adverb, in it I see, that «together» certainly concerns only the local community.

But the distinction becomes fertile, in the light of the formula of vows, if one is careful about the dynamic tension between the «to be associated» and the «together», or between «the Society» and «the community». From the Society, each community can expect and receive: inspiration, impetus, help in discernment, examining or even questioning, opening up to a wider communion, humanly and ecclesially. Without forgetting, and it is not insignificant or prosaic, that the Society sends the community new members for whom it has ensured a serious basic formation. But the Society has no less need of the concrete contribution of each local community: their members are in direct, daily contact with the reality of young people and their needs. The local community can and should be creative, and its awareness of new calls, its finding of new ways of answering, enriches and stimulates the whole body of the society. If the tension between these two realities, which are intertwined, weakens or disappears, there is a risk either of ideology or of routine of the repetitive «all done» denounced by Pgyu. I am not going to dwell on it and I come to the three mentioned characteristics.

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(6) Cf. *Cahiers Lasalliens* 2, pages 67-68; *Cahiers Lasalliens* 57...