

**For a better understanding
of the lasallian association (4/6)**

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5. An association which is seen BY keeping schools, together.

The schools that the Brothers keep, together, are of a very definite type, elementary schools, gratuitous schools; and a pastoral objective is the aim.

5.1. The «keep, together» acts for a very definite type of school: elementary schools....

John Baptist de La Salle was open to various appeals: training school for village schoolmasters; evening classes; Sunday schools; boarding school of Saint-Yon; house of correction; (pension de force). It remains no less true that the «little schools» were the principal theatre for the Brothers. The principal numerically, the principal for defining the identity of the Society.

This fact made *the Brothers quite easily «interchangeable»*. They gave the same «basic» teaching; they ensured it in all the subjects (limited in number). The transfer from one class to another did not cause upset on the professional level. And the transfer from one town to another did not require a very great effort to readapt. [Nevertheless, the Founder was aware that it was better to give children from the South, masters from the area. That is why he opened a novitiate in Marseille. And the schools in towns whose inhabitants were engaged in a maritime activity – Calais, Boulogne – adapted their syllabuses to the young people who attended them.]

This «tremendous» fact was to characterise the Institute for a long time, with slight changes according to the country. In France, when I entered the Congregation, the Brothers' schools were still very much primary schools – some adorning themselves with a higher primary section. There were boarding schools: one per district, in many instances. And the Brothers had created modern secondary teaching. There is no question of minimising the opening and creativity of the Institute. It is simply a matter of remembering that the Brothers were largely employed in the primary sector. Evidently that was to the advantage of «the association». It gave to the group an awareness of common identity, and permitted a largely collective formation.

Which could lead to a certain coolness: it happened that some Brothers looked upon confreres employed in different establishments (a boarding school, a secondary school) with a certain «distance». And was not one of the painful aspects of the disagreement concerning Latin in the U.S.A. caused

by the difficulty, if not incapability of certain French mentalities to accept another quite general development, without being aware enough that it related to a real «need» in another context?

5.2. The «keep, together» acts for a very definite type of school: elementary schools.

According to the formula of vows, the commitment of association is first of all the vow of a project, an aim, a «raison d'être»: if one makes a «Vow of association», it is to keep gratuitous schools. In his commentary, moreover, Brother Maurice Auguste retains only the vows of obedience, stability, gratuitous teaching (7). He stresses «the very close connection between 'vow of association' and 'commitment to teach gratuitously'». This remark must here be given its full value. Association has not been «vowed» simply «to keep schools», together. The society was not brought into being nor defined by «teaching» guaranteed in one, same school by a group of «Brothers». *What motivated the action of J.B. de La Salle and his companions, what decided them to establish, maintain, defend their «association» was first of all the wish to promote in practice gratuitous education.*

Already, in the *Explanations of the vows* given before 1725, the share given to gratuity was greater than that given to Association. A greater clarification of this question will be found in his thesis, with an analysis of the difference of insistence between 1694 and 1717. Even when, at the outset, the accent was on association, no hesitation was possible: *«the schools they were committed to keep, resolved to beg alms and live on bread alone in order not to abandon them could be only those gratuitous schools, the very reason for the new association».*

That is why they make a vow of association. From the time of the Bull of approbation, the formula of consecration no longer used the term «vow» to association: *I promise to unite myself and to live in society with the Brothers of the Christian Schools who are associated to keep, together and by association, gratuitous schools... Wherefore I promise and vow poverty, chastity, obedience, stability and to teach gratuitously... Which vows of poverty...* The «vow of association» is no longer mentioned. Restoring association to a place of honour as subject for a vow is relatively recent (8).

We know with what intransigence De La Salle and his companions established, maintained and defended the inviolability of effective gratuity. We remember the battles they had to fight to stay faithful to gratuity. All through the 19th century, they often had to fight to defend it, standing up to the communes which employed them, since the Brothers were, most frequently, public schoolmasters. When they had to give way here or there, they had recourse to the Holy See and obtained «indults». But it was possible to continue to make a vow of teaching gratuitously, because this corresponded to the awareness of the association and also, largely, to a practice revoked only by necessity (9).

I was brought up as a Novice and a young Brother, in this awareness of identity, even if the effective practice of total gratuity had become the exception (for some children, for example, in a school). The gratuity of the school was impossible because of the economic conditions of Catholic establishments. It remained on the horizon of our communal aspirations. It remained the norm for very specific matters (gifts from pupils or their families).

The practice of gratuity shifted to the effective poverty of the Brothers and communities. The absence of an individual salary and the parsimony of the salary allocated to the community helped to keep the school fees low, if not non-existent. On the other hand, and it is not unimportant, association, on the economic level, was lived «from the source» since it was the community that drew the salaries and not the individuals.

5.3. The «keeping, together» of schools aims at a «pastoral» end

In these gratuitous, primary schools, each Brother exercised a responsibility which can be called «pastoral» without violating either the spirit or the letter of the lasallian reading of that founding experience.

On the one hand, the Brother was, in fact, in «his» class «from morning till night». So he was responsible for the same group of children for a lengthy period of time. He taught all the subjects (at a basic level). But he wanted to link an initiation in knowing how to live, to these apprenticeships in knowledge. The Brother could establish an *educative personal rapport* with each one. He concerned himself with getting to know them individually as «persons»: the children were not first of all «pupils», the partakers in such and such a subject. The Brothers also sought to understand them better by trying to discover their social environment, the family background, etc. (psychological realism of the *Conduct of Schools* of which *MD 33* gives the key to a mystical reading: *the Good Shepherd knows his sheep and is known by them*).

In this sense, already, «the association» of a group of Brothers «to keep a school» does not mean the absorption of each teacher into an undifferentiated functional anonymity. The Brothers were easily interchangeable, certainly. But in the fulfilment of a set task, they established a sustained personal relationship with a precise group and with each individual.

On the other hand, and equally necessary, each Brother in his class was a «shepherd» in the sense that he not only taught the secular subjects at a basic level, but was also *the «catechist», minister of the Word of God*, JBS often recalls. This dimension of his activity is important quantitatively, since he had to teach Christian doctrine for four and a half hours a week. The Institute would cling to these four and half hours, a norm sanctioned by the Bull of Approbation. I have also known, if not a rigorous adherence to such a timetable, at least the explicit recommendation to strive to approach it. Besides, the catechetical dimensions of the Brother's activity, was qualitatively essential and all-encompassing. *Essential*, because, in the order of the aim, it was first: no child was admitted into the school unless he followed the catechism lessons; no «teaching» Brother who was not a catechist first of all. And the lasallian texts,

especially in the *Meditations*, do not fail to stress this absolute priority of the explicit announcing of the gospel by catechesis. For John Baptist de La Salle, every Brother was firstly a minister of the Word of God: that was his main task. *You are established by God*, he wrote, for example, in the meditation on Saint James the Great, *to succeed the holy Apostles in proclaiming the doctrine of Jesus Christ and in consolidating his holy law in the minds and hearts of those whom you teach, when you are teaching catechism, which is your principal task* (10).

The texts could be multiplied. It has even happened that the secular task of the Brothers has sometimes been belittled to extol even more, it was thought, their first responsibility in the catechetical sphere. Catechism was *All-encompassing* in the accomplishment of the ministry of the Brother because it was not solely nor even primarily a matter of communicating knowledge, but of bringing up children in a Christian way of life, of «teaching them how to live properly (11)», according to the tenets of the Rule, often repeated and commented on in lasallian spiritual writings. It can, then, be said that the concern for Christian education was at the core of all the educational activity of the Brother; it acted as the mainspring of all his relationships with «the children who were confided to his care».

I believe there is all of that in the lasallian language which, using the word evangelical or not, gives the Brothers their ministry as the bringing to life the salvific presence of Jesus Christ, «the Good Shepherd» for these young people. The Brothers are associated «to keep schools, together». But this «association» is one of «pastors» first of all and especially concerned to be «for the children in their care» «ministers of Jesus Christ», «dispensers of his mysteries», *responsible for «announcing» the good news of the Gospel to them.*

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(7) *Cahiers Lasalliens 2, Table des Matières*. But see *Cahiers Lasalliens 11*.

(8) Cf. Circular 406, 21.12.77, p. 126-127. See the formula of vows suggested in the Rule of 1987: Wherefore I promise and vow chastity, poverty, obedience, **association for the service of education to the poor** and of stability in the Institute conformably to the Bull of Approbation and to the Rule of the Institute.

(9) An Argentinian Brother, Bruno Alpago, has prepared a historical study on the service of the poor in the Institute which is to be given to the Capitulants of 2000, as the souvenir of this 43rd General Assembly. Obviously there is a lot to do with gratuity.

(10) MF 145.3 – See in Michel Sauvage, fsc, *La place capital de l'enseignement religieux dans la vie du Frère*, in *Catéchèse et laciati*, Paris. Ligel. 1962, p. 592-600.

(11) To teach them how to live properly, to prepare them for work when their parents want to employ them... The educative aim goes beyond school time.