

**For a better understanding  
of the lasallian association (5/6)**

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## 6. The founding experience of an association OF Brothers.

Here again, the association revealed itself in a truly meaningful way. It was exclusive. It implied a pedagogical sharing. It worked inside the fraternal «communion» of men bound by the same consecration.

### 6.1. An Association To «keep» Schools.

By that I mean that there was *complete affinity between the pedagogical team and the religious community*. It was the Brothers and they alone, who kept the school. For a long time there were no lay teachers and the concrete association of the Brothers could certainly feel that the whole progress of the school depended on it. It was certainly even clearer as long as no external power intervened in the school syllabus, time-table, etc. When reading the *Rules* and the *Conduct of Schools* there is certainly a feeling that the Brothers were the only masters on board.

This awareness of real identity and ability «to keep schools, together» marked the Brothers mentality deeply. Even when it became necessary to accept the collaboration of «lay masters», it was long continued to see and treat them as «back-up staff», rather than as true partners of the association. To be aware of this, you simply have to study the evolution of the official thinking of the Institute (General Chapters, Circulars of the Superiors General) concerning the place of lay teachers in the school (12).

Here are two references, corresponding to moments of my life. Immediately after the Second World War, the General Chapter of 1946 was strongly conservative, if not reactionary. Concerning the presence of lay-people in the educational institutions, it firstly declared that the first priority was to dismiss all female staff where they had been wrongly introduced. In terms of the male lay teachers, if it is not possible to drop their services, the mid-range objective would be to eliminate them also. Ten years later, the report of the General Chapter of 1956 stated that the members of the Assembly were divided about the place to give to lay teachers: a necessary evil for some, representing a stroke of luck for others. And the Superior General who drew up the report declared that he agreed with the second opinion. For the sake of truth and balance, I will add this: I have just referred to the official language. My concrete experience was one of great friendship and mutual support between Brothers and lay-people.

The Brothers «kept» the school more than the coincidence between religious community and educational team expressed on the level of the organisation of the school by *an important identification between religious superior and headmaster*. Even in the exercise of the professional task, the Brother was dependent on the Director to whom he owed «obedience». The role of the Director was paramount for the association of Brothers to work properly in the whole running of the school.

For a long time this unity stamped the behaviour and mentality of the Brothers and I have known confreres who had a real problem of conscience when a lay teacher was placed in authority in the schools in which they were teaching. I can still hear one Brother saying to me in this respect - it was in 1957, and in the Institution where he was teaching, a lay person had just been appointed as «head of department» - *«I did not make a vow of obedience to lay people.»*

The association of the Institute worked in a very real way at the level of each school. Because the Brothers were placed by their religious superiors and because their mobility was not hampered by factors which would not depend on the internal life of the Institute. Because the Brother Director was appointed by the major Superior and because, usually, the span of his «professional» mandate was set by the *Rule* (13) which limited the time of his appointment as religious superior. Because *the major Superior exercised his authority*, his control (or his help) *in the professional domain*. The canonical visit implied, for example, the visit by the Brother Visitor to all classes (including those of lay teachers, when there were any).

We are already touching on the community of pedagogical sharing.

### 6.2. An association which implied a pedagogical sharing.

In a sense, one of the reasons for the early start to the «community» of masters under the impetus of the Founder was the awareness by De La Salle of the risks which the independence, even anarchy, of the teachers were causing the success of the schools in Rheims to run.

So, by uniting them, he wanted to synchronise their procedures, their attitudes, their pedagogical and educational aims. He achieved this quite quickly: this convergence of aims, behaviour and efforts, the continuity that it would facilitate in the school progress of the children would bring about the success and renown of the Brothers' schools.

This convergence would further facilitate the working of the association in the Institute, in so far as the pedagogical practice of the Brothers was characterised by common features.

Pedagogical sharing, then, was that of a certain consensus and newcomers were usually initiated into a certain style and a certain number of pedagogical moulds, bearing on details (for example, use of the signal).

But it would be wrong purely and simply to confuse association to keep schools and pedagogical uniformity, with repetitive tendency and risk of routine. The danger of pedagogical conformity has certainly been a real one in the Institute, and it could happen that pedagogical creativity has

not been sufficiently promoted by association. The *Conduct of Schools* may have been expressed in restricting terms, as also has more than one presentation of the *Rule*.

But what cannot be forgotten as representing a permanent force for adaptation and innovation is the structure of pedagogical sharing between the Brothers which resulted in the *Conduct of Schools*.

*This conduct has been compiled (by the late Mr De La Salle) only after a great many conferences between himself and the Brothers of the Institute who were the oldest and the most capable of running a school and after several years' experience. Nothing was included which had not been well discussed and tried out (14).*

It would suffice to remember all that the Brothers have devised for renewal of the school and the creation of new school models over the course of the years. Thanks to sharing, the association (of the Institute) showed itself fertile [you simply have to think of the quality of so many school text books produced by a «Reunion de Professeurs»: this label corresponded to a reality, as one or other of Brother Yves Poutet's studies has demonstrated (15).] This sharing in association forms the pedagogical outcome of a communion in consecrated life.

### 6.3. An association which acts within the fraternal communion, of men committed by a same consecration.

I have already stressed the full coincidence in the founding experience, between pedagogical team and religious fraternity: it is really the community of «associated» Brothers who keep school and it is the Institute that keeps gratuitous schools. Briefly, it has to be stressed that the fact of being made up of men brought together by one and the same total consecration to God, gives strength to the association to keep schools. The converse must not be lost sight of: the strength of association to keep schools can often reinforce the links of fraternal communion, can give body to the consecrated life, can deepen perseverance in religious commitment.

The association draws new strength from the fact of the «mystical» dimension which feeds it and stimulates it. *Mystical dimension*: the awareness of a vocation, of a call from God with the Brothers. Mystical dimension nourished by community practices (prayers, formation, spiritual reading, retreats...). Mystical dimension which interprets and upholds the lasallian spiritual writings, written specifically for the Brothers and which repeatedly invite them to discover the evangelical meanings of their work, endeavouring to educate them in the interiority which is indispensable for a teacher, and calling them to commit themselves with renewed fervour, in an evangelical way.

Most especially, the fraternal spirit which quickens community life is expressed in a *specific style of educative relationship*. At the time of a first assembly held in 1686,

M. de La Salle's companions had taken a certain number of steps which expressed the burgeoning awareness of their collective identity. One of the decisions concerned the change of name of their community. They decided to change the name of *masters of the Christian Schools to Brothers of the Christian Schools*. They fully realised that this change of name had a double significance: as regards community life in the manner of the first Christians, and as regards the style of educative relationships. This is how Blain ends his dissertation on this topic:

*This name of Brothers of the Christian Schools meant to them that as Brothers to one another, they owed one another signs of a tender, but spiritual friendship; and that needing to see themselves as elder brothers of those who came to be taught, they needed to exercise this ministry of charity with a charitable heart. (16)*

As you can guess, there is no question here of painting an idyllic picture of the origins of the Institute, but of showing the different aspects, the various dimensions, the numerous implications of association for keeping gratuitous schools. You can see that association clearly stamps everything that one could call the manner of living as much for the Brothers as for the Institute. Most of the relationships highlighted can be considered as essential. In fact, the attachment of the Institute to each of them has often conveyed what was considered very essential.

In reality, what is essential is not each one taken separately. It is more the global nature that they make up, the dynamic totality in which each one signs up, the vital cohesion which makes them indispensable to the identity and the mission. It is necessary to go further and state that it is the reason for being a Brother, rather than the way of being a Brother (and Institute), which is the very core of the association.

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(12) Here it is necessary to go to the study on shared Mission. Moreover, I remember that in my youth, a retreat was organised at the beginning of the school year for the lay teachers of the District of Lille. There were not many at the time, one or two in each school.

(13) Canon law was sometimes quoted, which limited the mandates of religious superiors. But in the Institute, it was the Rule which set these durations 3,6, 9 years. After 9 years, an indult had to be obtained from Rome.

(14) *Conduite des Ecoles, Préface, Oeuvres Complètes*, p. 597.

(15) I am here referring particularly to a Presentation given in Montpellier, in 1980, I think, on the different activities of the Brothers of the Christian Schools in the XIX<sup>th</sup> century, under the guidance of Gérard Cholvy, Professor of History, co-author with Yves-Marie Hilaire, of the Religious history of contemporary France, in 3 volumes.

(16) Blain 1,241.