

ASSOCIATION AND COMMUNION (1/3)

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Preliminary:

The present article is a consideration without pretension, and without specific theological, historical or Lasallian competence on my part. Let me simply offer a filial interpretation of JBS, derived from a few questions that have been with me for a long time. I am attempting a little personal synthesis.

The questions, in no particular order, are the following:

- Why consecration to the Trinity alone?
- The “vow” of Association? What does it involve?
- “Together and by Association”?
- Why are the Brothers invited to “gladly associate lay persons with them in their mission”?
- Association: what does it involve for lay people? What path(s) to follow?

I. “MOST HOLY TRINITY...”

It is an old question: was it the date, that is to say the last day of the annual retreat of the Brothers, which inspired this address, or rather did not John Baptist de La Salle “choose the solemn feast by a movement of exceptional devotion?” (1) Brother Maurice Auguste does not settle the point. (2) For our part, even if the step taken by John Baptist de La Salle, Nicolas Vuyart and Gabriel Drolin was individual and exceptional, we advance to the “heroic vow” of 1691, on the date of 21st November 1691, feast of the Presentation of Mary, where the formula begins with “most holy Trinity” (3). The moment appears sufficiently solemn for the inspiration to go beyond the chance element, even if this formula had been in use for some years already.

Without entering here into a detailed description of the Spirituality of the French School, the choice of addressing the consecration to the Trinity seems to me to bring outstanding depth to the content of the vows “of association and of union”.

In the Meditation for the feast of the Holy Trinity De La Salle makes the exhortation: “If it is true that this mystery, which has no equal in dignity and in holiness, is the first object of the veneration of all the faithful, it should be all the more important for you, since you are obliged to teach it and to make it known to all *the children who are the living plants in the field of the Church*. They, too, were consecrated to the Most Holy Trinity in baptism, just as you were; they bear in their souls the indelible character of their

belonging to God; they are indebted to this adorable mystery for the anointing with grace that has been poured into their hearts. It is only right that you who are responsible for explaining this mystery to them as far as faith allows, should recognise it as the source of all enlightenment, the foundation of faith, and the basis of our religion.”(4)

We can see de La Salle putting children and Brothers on the same footing – sharing the same baptism, they are consecrated to the Trinity. John Baptist de La Salle considers young people and Brothers as members of the same Church, precisely because of their integration with the Trinity. They share in the same mystery of communion which is that of the divine persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Thus penetrated with faith in the importance of this reality, the Brothers by their zeal have as mission to cause the children to share in this mystery of communion.

“With this in view you should today pay very special honour, and dedicate yourself entirely, to the Most Holy Trinity, to contribute as far as you will be able to extend its glory over all the earth. For this purpose enter into the spirit of your Institute and stir up in yourself the zeal that God wishes you to have in its fullness, so that you can give your pupils some understanding of this mystery.” (5) Let us try to develop this further.

• Vatican Council II draws upon the prayer of Jesus “may they be one as we also are one” to state that there is “a certain resemblance between the union of the divine persons and that of the children of God” (G.S. N° 24). “For the closer their union with the Father, the Word, and the Spirit, the more deeply and easily will they be able to grow in mutual brotherly love” (U.R. N° 7). Communion with God is the source, the model and the aim of universal fraternity. The relations between Father, Son and Spirit are mutual. Each one is at the same time giving and receiving; each does not accept giving without receiving. No one person is self-sufficient, none wishes to proudly dominate the others nor escape into solitude. Each finds joy and fullness in the two others in unceasing movement, without loss of identity. A model in one sense, while inimitable as the communion image of God, yet how enlightening and stimulating for us. God is trinitarian and therefore relational by definition. (6)

“To become as God is” (Lk 6,36), to be “*participant in the divine nature*” (2 P 1,4), is to welcome and to adopt the way of being of God, that is to say to enter into the dynamic of communion which is his very being. Because it is the vocation of women and men to be in the image of this infinite love which links the three divine persons in the Trinity, the human community does not realise itself fully, until it builds and fulfils itself as a *koinonia* of love. “God has willed that all people constitute a single family, and relate to one another mutually as brothers and sisters” (GS, N° 24, §1). (7)

The Trinity was then the mystery at the centre of the whole inspiration and thrust of the new Institute. It would well seem that this reference is the final step in an unequalled experience of the Triune God, not only in a theological but also in an anthropological movement. An undertaking such as that of creating a Society for animating schools in order to reach youth and announce Jesus Christ to them, could do so, in its nature and in its constitution, only by reference to the life of the Trinity

II. «ASSOCIATION AND UNION»

Without going into the historical circumstances of the pronouncing of the Vow of 1791, called the “heroic vow”, we can affirm that this vow, long kept secret,⁽⁸⁾ taking place in a dramatic situation at the human level, reveals an intense moment of spiritual initiative, on the part of John Baptist de La Salle certainly, and on the part of his two confrères. The formula such as transcribed in Blain is as follows:

*“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...And, for that purpose, I, John Baptist de La Salle, priest, I, Nicolas Vuyart, and I, Gabriel Drolin, from now on and forever until the last surviving one of us, or until the complete establishment of the said Society, make the vow of **association and union** to bring about and maintain the said establishment, without being able to withdraw from this obligation, even if only we three remained in the said Society, and if we were obliged to beg for alms and to live on bread alone.*

In view of which we promise to do, all together and by common accord, everything we shall think in conscience, and regardless of any human consideration, to be for the greater good of the said Society.

Done on this 21st of November, feast of the Presentation of Our Lady, 1691. In testimony of which we have signed...”

We notice an expression of the vow which is unique by comparison with all the previous formulas but which will henceforth be a guide for later formulas. (9)

“vow of association and union”

We have here the birth of a conviction that the new community could only survive by a solemn undertaking by its members, to remain united despite whatever trials and tribulations the future might hold.

What is amazing, despite possibly a chance element, is that in all the written works of John Baptist de La Salle, there is only one use of this expression “association and union”, and that is in connection with marriage and the sacrament thereof:

*“Jesus Christ having established a law of grace, has willed that all within that law be performed with grace. For this reason, knowing that one of the most corrupted of actions was marriage, because most people enter into it with intentions far removed from those that God had in instituting it, he wished to oblige Christians to undertake it with only the holiest and purest of intentions. This he did by raising **this association and this union of man and woman to the dignity of a sacrament**. This was also to offer the means to husband and wife to carry out the duties of this state with grace, to *bear the weight of troubles easily and to preserve towards one another a very great fidelity.*”⁽¹⁰⁾*

Without forcing texts to say more than they do, it must be agreed that de La Salle never made a connection between

these two engagements. All the same, if we look at it from the point of view of the spiritual life, God raised marriage to the rank of a sacrament and accords to man and woman all the graces needed to live it daily.

Further on in the Duties of a Christian De La Salle explains:

*“The sacramental grace of marriage is that which God gives to married people to live chastely and holily in this state, to be strongly united, to support the troubles of marriage, and to carry out the duties it imposes. *And this grace is linked to the three obligations of married persons which are: to remain together forever without being free to separate, to remain faithful to one another, and to nourish and bring up their children as Christians.*” (11)*

Would it be baseless to advance that the vow of association and of union, as pronounced by the three, possesses this content, namely a union in remaining “together forever” and an unfailing fidelity, in the image of Christ and his Church and in the image of the Trinity itself. If God by his grace accords to some all the graces needed to accompany them in their difficulties, he will act likewise with others.

And when La Salle speaks of community, he exhorts the Brothers as follows:

*“Since God has given you the grace of calling you to live in community, there is nothing that you should more earnestly ask of him than *this union of mind and heart* with your Brothers. Only by *means of this union* will you acquire that peace which ought to be the whole joy of your life. Entreat the God of hearts to keep your heart and those of your Brothers one in the heart of Jesus.”⁽¹²⁾*

All this demonstrates to what point John Baptist de La Salle considered these two realities as necessary to his young Institute. At the same time it is clear that the insistence he places on not confusing “association” and “union” is a point that he considers so important as to say each separately. Moreover in the formula of vows, the second term is expressed in more developed form further on.

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(1) F Maurice Auguste: CL 2 p 58.

(2) F Maurice Auguste: CL 2 p 79 ss.

(3) Blain I p 313.

(4) Med 46.

(5) Id.

(6) Église et Communion J.RIGAL p 337.

(7) Id.

(8) Fr Maurice Auguste, CL n° 2, p 39-40.

(9) Fr Maurice Auguste, CL n° 2 p 38.

(10) Jean-Baptiste de La Salle, D.A. 310,1.

(11) Jean-Baptiste de La Salle D.A. p. 310,2.

(12) Jean Baptiste de La Salle M.D 39, 3.

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