

**THE LASALLIAN COMMUNITY: THE VOW OF ASSOCIATION
CONTRIBUTION OF THE INTERNAL DOCUMENTS
OF THE INSTITUTE OF THE BROTHERS
OF THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS
FOLLOWING VATICAN II**

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The aim of this dissertation on the Theology of Religious Life is to present the Lasallian community and one of its specific vows, the vow of association.

The first Lasallian community was founded by St John Baptist de La Salle in response to a call from God. The charism bestowed on him by the Holy Spirit led him to devote himself to the education of young people, and especially poor young people.

To accomplish this mission, he gathered some teachers, some of whom were already involved in the education of children of well-off families. For those who wished to undertake this task, he organised courses in which they received the formation needed for teaching children. With these persons, he founded the first community devoted to this mission.

With time, the number of teachers and communities increased, giving rise to the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, devoted to the education of the poor. The Institute spread to many parts of France. John Baptist de La Salle sent Gabriel Drolin to Rome to obtain the papal approbation for the new religious family. The reputation of the well-organised teaching, the quality of the teachers and the spirit of the Lasallian communities, consolidated this enterprise which cared for poor children free of charge. The exclusively educational commitment of all its members led to the adoption of a lay character throughout the Institute, in order to ensure that all these new religious were devoted exclusively to the education of the poor. Consequently, from the very beginning, all the members were called *Brothers* and were not ordained priests. They were, therefore, lay persons consecrated to God.

The consecration of the Brothers has its roots in baptism. The Brother surrenders himself to the Most Holy Trinity to procure the glory of God, and this consecrates every Brother, who is sent and supported by the community in his educational mission, and in the fulfilment of all the requirements of religious life. The specific vows of association for the service of the poor, and of stability in the Institute, express the sense of

responsibility with which the Institute wishes to fulfil its mission in the Church.

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I conclude my dissertation by underlining the principal aspects developed in the course of my work, wishing at the same time to present the basic areas which can serve as points of departure for further and deeper reflection. I do this in 10 points, as a sort of Decalogue:

1. From the beginning, religious life has been characterised by its participation in the mission of the Church. The mission to which it is called is an essential dimension of the charism of each religious Institute. All charisms in the Church are missionary, which means that there is no form of religious life which is not missionary. The Christian vocation and, in particular, the vocation to the religious life, is the existential following of Jesus Christ. As a consequence, religious families represent Christ in the world, emphasising one or other of the aspects of his mission. The Holy Spirit, who bestows the gift of religious life on the Church, wants all the aspects of the mission of Jesus Christ to be fully represented. That is why the various religious Institutes - in union with and complementing the People of God as a whole - participate in the mission of the Church, each in its own particular way. In this mission, religious communities have great value, for they bring together persons with a passion for God, in order they may bear witness to it in various areas of human life. These persons are not isolated individuals but, in order to live out their vocation to follow Christ in a religious fraternity, they unite themselves and assume the responsibility manifested in the mission entrusted to the Institute.

We can say that mission and community have always gone together. This leads us to affirm that mission creates community, which by its nature is missionary. That is why John Baptist de La Salle established communities of teachers for the mission of educating young people, and especially poor young people. He established them in order to give a Christian education to the children of the working class and the poor, and he set up schools so that they could learn free of charge to read, write and count, and to receive a good Christian education. He realised also that Christian schools needed communities of religious totally dedicated to the work of education. From this we deduce that there can be no school without a community. In our days, we need to realise the important role played by the Lasallian community in the educational mission of the Institute. Each member of the community must feel he has been sent on this mission, and is supported in it, so that he can fulfil it in the spirit required.

2. We are facing, at the present time, a serious problem in religious life: the awareness of our identity. After Vatican II, it could be said that religious life had lost its distinguishing characteristics and its status as a special kind of life. This is one of the problems faced by many religious Institutes affected by the rapid changes they experienced, as well as by the means of communication which are so influential in our society. Before, religious life enjoyed the prestige of aspiring to a life of perfection based on the evangelical counsels: today, however, sanctity is not the privilege of religious life, but rather an obligation for all Christians by the fact of their baptism. In this situation, religious life may have been in some way displaced at a time of powerful social changes. We have attributed one of the causes of this problem to changes in society, but we need

also to indicate the extent to which this situation has been further complicated greatly by the present age of the members of the Institutes, by the complexity of the work undertaken and the responsibilities that this entails, and by the lack of new vocations, etc. This situation is such that religious feel powerless to respond to the mission of the Institute. 101

Following Vatican II, many lay people were seen participating in the mission of religious Institutes. The problem of identity is much greater in Institutes of lay religious life, and this is also the case, as one might expect, in the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. On the other hand, there are many lay teachers involved in the educational mission of this Institute. In this case, the loss of identity is much greater for the Brothers, because they work side-by-side with lay colleagues, and note that they do the same work as they do. What is the solution? In a situation such as this, in order not to lose their own identity, Brothers need to emphasise in a concrete manner that they are Brothers, that they belong to God, the specific nature of their life and what they are. They need to rediscover the meaning of being religious in the midst of the world. The identity of the Brother does not reside in what he does, but in what he is. It is necessary to highlight the fact that the Brother is a person consecrated especially to God. Reflection about the identity of the Brother needs to continue in order to strengthen periodically his specific nature and revitalise his consecration. When the identity of the Brother is reflected sufficiently in the witness he bears, it is much clearer and has the necessary power to become a factor in the mission to young people, and especially to poor young people.

3. Reflection on the identity of the Brother as a consecrated person can lead to another problem: there is a danger of adopting a form which is far removed from one which unites it with the rest of the Church. Vatican II presented the Church as the People of God: through baptism, all believers belong to this People of God. The Brother is one of them. Baptism incorporates us in the mission of the Church which fulfils the mission of Jesus Christ in the world. Each one is responsible for the common mission, according to his state. Those who have been ordained priests have to dedicate their lives to the service of the Church, the People of God; as for baptised lay Christians, they carry out this mission in a variety of ways, by the witness of their family life, their profession, etc. Lay persons, participating in the mission of the Church, are a sign for the world, through their love and service of others, by the sacrifices of each day, by their work, etc. This sign is very important in all walks of life, because it represents Jesus Christ in their midst. Of the lay religious, the Brothers of the Christian Schools are called to bear witness by their lives as consecrated persons, belonging to the religious laity of the Church. This lay character of the Institute has been defended from the beginning of the Institute. By his baptism, and by his religious consecration, the Brother must be aware of his specific vocation in the Church and in the world, by his special contribution as a Brother to all people, and especially to the young people he serves.
4. The educational mission of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools has its roots in the charism received by its Founder, John Baptist de La Salle. The charism is a gift of the Holy Spirit for the Church. Thanks to this gift, the Church can fulfil its mission in the world, responding to the needs of the people

of the time. The Holy Spirit bestows his gifts on the faithful not for their personal benefit, but for the common good of the whole Church. The acceptance of this gift by a person serves for the edification of the Church and for the foundation of a religious Institute with a special mission. Religious Institutes have an important role in the renewal and adaptation of the Church in the world.

In the case of John Baptist de La Salle, this special gift was bestowed on him to promote the education of young people in need of a human and Christian education. He responded to this gift by founding the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, establishing schools for young people, and especially poor young people. Those who continue to be inspired by this charism today are the Brothers of that Institute, who seek constantly to deepen their understanding of this charism, so that it becomes more valuable for the Church and for the world of today. The charism of the Institute entails consecration to God, in order to fulfil, by association, the apostolic ministry of education. We can say that the Brothers are consecrated by and for the educational mission. This charism leads the Brothers to take the trouble to get to know thoroughly the background of their pupils so as to be able to respond to their needs, a task they share with their lay colleagues. The Brothers realise that they count on many secular colleagues in order to carry out the charism of St John Baptist de La Salle. That is the reason why the Institute offers different ways of involving oneself in the mission, realising that the charism is not the exclusive property of the Brothers, and can be reflected in the various lifestyles of those who involve themselves in the Lasallian mission.

5. St John Baptist de La Salle was a priest and fulfilled his ministry zealously, as a person who clearly had a vocation. However, he did not want his Brothers to be priests, convinced that the vocation of Christian education was a specific entity which totally embraces the life of a person committed to it, and for which there was a *special need* in the Church. For a short time, De La Salle considered the possibility that the Brothers, at least some, could be priests also, so that the pastoral needs of the new schools could be adequately met; but he dropped the idea, and he re-affirmed his wish that all the Brothers should remain lay.

But what is really surprising is that, in all his writing, St John Baptist de La Salle refers to the vocation of a Christian educator as a *ministry*. This implies something revolutionary, the Church at that time, I think, was unaware of this, since up to that time ministries were considered the prerogative of persons who had been ordained. It was only after Vatican II that there began a reassessment of the theology of ministries in the Church. And even today, we do not think that at the ecclesial level there has been an acceptance of the importance implied by the ministry of Christian education, as a platform for the evangelisation of the younger generations.

If the Brothers have refused to include the priesthood in the Institute, despite the insistent calls to reconsider this decision, it has not been through stubbornness. What has made us maintain our lay character has been basically the conviction that this is our state and that our ministry is already *complete*. Christian education is a fundamental ministry of the utmost importance, and we wish to fulfil it as Brothers, Brothers to one another, and Brothers to those entrusted to

us. The term “*ministers of Christ*” often used by St John Baptist de La Salle, refers to the task we have been given by Jesus to represent him among young people, as *minors* (minister is derived from *minus*), as those who serve. We are teachers (*magister, maiores*), but we live as minors, side-by-side with people, young people, beside our lay colleagues, trying to be mediators of the presence of Christ in a world which, in our days, lives without being aware of the presence of God.

6. From the beginning of the Institute, the Brothers have carried out their mission *together and by association*. On examination of these beginnings, we see the strength of that association from the very start. The vitality of the newly-formed Institute, of the community and of the experience of the community, was what consolidated the mission. Association rooted the Brothers in the community so that they could carry out their mission better, and was at the same time the guarantee of the continuity of both the mission and the community. Between the members of the Institute there came about a communion which enriched interpersonal relationships: this fraternity was the foundation of the structures which served to strengthen relationships. The importance of association was clear from the beginning of the Institute: in fact, it was expressed by a specific vow. The vow of association manifests trust in God who calls members to be Brothers, and to live in solidarity with one another in order to fulfil the mission of the Institute. The first Brothers did not make vows, as we understand them nowadays: these came later as a result of a kind of canonical imposition. In those early days, they joined together for an educational mission which they carried out in schools founded for the poor. The association of the Brothers is something fundamental, so much so that it is one of the primary characteristics of Lasallian identity. A person associates himself in order to collaborate in the educational work of the Institute, but we need to stress that this participation in association has more to do with a connection with other persons than with the maintenance of works, since from association is born the community of associated members dedicated to the mission.
7. When we rediscover the importance of association, we rediscover also the value of the community in the Lasallian mission. The community is where the Brothers live together, sharing their faith, the apostolate, their fraternity. The distinctive characteristic of a Brothers’ community is its faith. In it, faith leads the Brothers to share their experience of God, and to discover the presence of God in all their apostolic work. Taking the option for God to its logical conclusion, and professing it publicly, they seek to live the Gospel in its entirety, radically and consistently. They realise that the following of Christ is the aim of their whole life, and they encourage one another to pursue it.

It is important for them to share their experience of God, especially in their daily prayer, when they listen together to the Word of God. Community meditation is its “*being with God*”, in communion with God and with others. Community meditation expresses the life of the whole community. For this reason, all the members of the community cherish the shared moments of community meditation.

Community meditation helps everyone to carry out their apostolate. Hence, community life is the soul of the Brothers' mission and enables them to do their educational work better with young people. The mission of the community is to bear witness to Christian life, by its contribution as consecrated persons. Its visibility in the apostolate implies the presence of Jesus Christ in the world of education. The visibility and the witness of the community are very important for the education of young people because, by means of the Brothers, young people can encounter God. For them, the community becomes a sign through which God speaks to them. We can conclude from what we have said that association is a tool for building the Brothers' community: in it all share what they are and what they have. By rediscovering association and the importance of the community for the mission of the Institute, we recognise that fraternity is the true moving-force of its mission.

8. Today we live in a world in which many changes are taking place which affect human society. These changes influence the Church and, therefore, religious life as such, and its mission in the world. The advances in technology and in the economy have modified also the structure of human life and have widened the gap between the rich and poor, creating closed groups in both sectors. In the midst of these social changes, the religious experience itself of people has been seriously affected. This is clear from less interest in the Church, especially among young people: the number of people who declare themselves to be practising Catholics has dramatically diminished and this tendency is continuing. Many young people feel lost in the face of so many things offered by the social context. In addition to this, what the Church offers young people is hardly heard.

The Church encounters this problem in many countries all over the world and especially in Europe. In this situation, religious communities have a particular relevance. As persons consecrated to God, they are witnesses to the love of God for people in the world. Their life and witness are a happy manifestation of their love for Jesus Christ. The Brothers' community, by its educational service of young people, manifests the presence of God among people: they are, for young people, witnesses to the faith. The witness to the faith by isolated individuals is important, but the witness that really bears fruit is that of the various Christian communities, and in particular, that of religious communities because of their vocation to be today a significant presence of Jesus.

9. We have spoken of the Brothers' community and of its importance for the education of young people. The Lasallian community has great value as part of the mission of the Institute, since also by means of the Brothers' community young people must be educated to live in community. People by their nature are gregarious. We could say that outside the human community there can be no intellectual and spiritual development. Now, if we look at religious life we see that it is characterised by a particular but not exclusive kind of community life: its educational task regarding young people includes teaching them to live in a human and Christian society and to develop fully.

The Lasallian community must make it easier for young people to have access to the community of the Church. In this community in which we are all brothers

and sisters, young people have the possibility of maturing as human beings. The witness given by believers will be an invitation to them to accept the challenge of deepening their faith. We have to recognise the valuable role played by Brothers' communities in encouraging the creation of faith communities. It is important to be involved in the process of vocational discernment of young people. For this reason, the Lasallian community cannot refuse to be a community open to young people, where an encounter with God, and a generous acceptance of the Lord's call, is made easier. In this way, the Brothers' community, by its work with groups of young people, will be a community which builds educational communities which are really Christian and Lasallian. This is an unrenounceable part of its educational apostolate.

10. We can see also less interest in religious life on the part of young people. Religious communities face a difficult situation. This problem obviously affects also the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. There are Districts where, for some time now, no young people have come forward wanting to be Brothers; communities are becoming increasingly older, and this has consequences for Institute educational establishments. The educational mission needs the communities of the Brothers as a point of reference; for these Brothers to share their spirituality and their mission, and stimulate the running of these educational establishments. Of course, we see at the present time the desire of our lay partners to collaborate more in the mission of the Institute. There are some who wish to commit themselves to it in a more explicit manner, beginning by participating in the various formation sessions organised for them by the Districts of the Institute. Others express a desire to associate themselves with the Institute by sharing in its Lasallian spirituality. This leads Brothers to promote communities of associated members. Also, lay associates share the Brothers' educational mission, and they enrich one another by sharing their vision of the mission. The presence of communities of associated members in Institute educational establishments bears witness to the following of Christ, and inspires the task of evangelisation in each of these establishments.