

A POINT OF VIEW ON LASALLIAN ASSOCIATION IN WEST AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

Association, on the whole reflection of Brothers and lay people, is an issue that is becoming more important. In this paper a personal reading of the journey as seen from the experience of the District of West Africa is proposed. As such, it opens the possibility of initiating a discussion of ideas for confronting views and opening the dialogue beyond the various particular views of the Region.

Key words: Lasallian Association - Brothers - Lay people – Communion - Formation - Christian Life Planning

If there is one topic, which has attracted the attention of a number of Brothers in Africa in the last decade, it is surely that of association. There is no single understanding or single experience of Lasallian association. Each one has an own understanding of association. Each District has its own understanding and experience of association. How are we to formulate an official and relevant statement, which takes the varying experiences on the continent into account?

I wish to share here a personal interpretation of Lasallian association in the Burkinabe context. This limited and one-sided interpretation commits the author alone even if he is drawing upon a rich experience of contact with Brothers belonging to other Districts.

We place ourselves in a Christian context where the sharing of the Christian faith in Catholic schools is not meeting too many obstacles. We make a distinction between the vow of association of the Brothers and the associative link between Brothers and Laypeople. When we speak of association it is a question of this link of belonging or feeling of belonging to a history, to an educational tradition of Brothers and of committed laypeople, which are supporting a project together by today's mission.

According to the Congregation for Catholic Education the Christian educator is a "*master of faith*" and a "*master of humanity*"¹. By means of the service of Christian education the educator seeks to lead the young person towards his/her full realisation in the fully revealed humanity of Jesus Christ. De La Salle in the 17th century proposed this ideal educator who takes into account human education and Christian education.

¹ CONGREGATION POUR L'EDUCATION CATHOLIQUE, *La dimension religieuse de l'éducation dans l'école catholique*, Paris, Téquin, 1985, p.49, n° 96.

I think that we are less and less faithful to the insight of Saint John Baptist de La Salle who before creating the schools attached himself first and foremost to the spiritual and moral formation of the masters². The Lasallian School it is said was conceived and animated as an ensemble that was unified and integrated at every level. The principal merit of Saint John Baptist de La Salle as recognised by the Church and by historians³ is to be found in the very special care he brought to the preparation of masters. It was a formation that was religious, moral, intellectual and professional. What trace or basis do we have today of the profile of a Christian educator?

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The "*perdurability*" of the message of Saint John Baptist de La Salle depends on its permanent and progressive re-actualisation today. It remains possible to draw upon Saint John Baptist de La Salle as source for putting forward a "*Lasallian association*" in West Africa.

However in the Burkinabe context the topic of Lasallian association has been little explored. Six years ago Brother Paulin Degbé (fsc) presented a memoir on Lasallian association for the canonical licentiate in Pastoral theology⁴.

His point of departure is the perspective of the Church-family of God, so as to rethink the collaboration between FSC's and Laypeople involved in education in West Africa. He calls up the image of Church-family of God so as to understand better the parameters of Lasallian association.

The interest of this memoir for this article is set at two levels: on the one hand the research of Brother Paulin covers several countries of West Africa, among them Burkina Faso. In addition Lasallian association as reviewed in the light of Church-family of God permits the promotion of the laity across Lasallian establishments.

The Brothers as religious called to be "*experts in communion*"⁵ should according to Brother Paulin Degbé share their experience with lay educators. This sharing would reinforce communion as Church-family of God and would allow the constitution of faith communities in the establishments.

However this communion is rendered difficult because of certain difficulties noted by Brother Paulin Degbé: low salaries, absence of social security, lack of openness and trust on the part of the Brothers with regard to Laypeople.⁶ The major obstacle is that the teaching career is not perceived by Laypeople as a vocation. Lasallian association will be effective - a chance for the Church-family of God - if the association process is in line with the basic aspirations of this association in promoting brotherhood.⁷

The fundamental values of Church-family of God listed by Brother Paulin Degbé are: unity around the leader, family spirit, the role and the place of each member in the family, solidarity-

² Cf. F. ANSELME (Fsc) *Conduite des écoles chrétiennes par Saint Jean Baptiste de La Salle*, édition du manuscrit français 11.759 de la bibliothèque nationale de Paris, Procure générale, 1951, p.12-13.

³ Paul CHRISTOPHE, *L'Eglise dans l'histoire des hommes*, du quinzième siècle à nos jours, Paris, Droguet-Ardert, 1985, p.171.

⁴ Paulin Degbé, *En marche vers l'association lasallienne: perspectives pastorales pour la sous-région Ouest-africain*, mémoire de Licence canonique, UCAO, Abidjan, 2004.

⁵ CONGREGATION POUR L'EDUCATION CATHOLIQUE, *Les personnes consacrées et leur mission dans l'école, réflexions et orientations*, Editions Paulines n° 17.

⁶ Paulin Degbé, op.cit., pp.91-94.

⁷ *Ibid.* p.130.

sharing, etc. These values will enable Laypeople to engage in school pastoral action and vocation promotion. In order to attain this Brother Paulin Degbé proposes strategies that go from "individual formation" to "continuing formation"⁸ 48

Unfortunately Brother Paulin Degbé in beginning an inculturation of Lasallian association in the context of Church-family of God has not distanced himself from the concept of Lasallian association of other Districts (Europe, Latin America). The notion of Lasallian association ought to be thought about afresh in an African context keeping in mind the realities and mentalities of the different partners in Lasallian establishments because the FSC are not the only ones welcoming associates into their congregations.

If Lasallian association is a fact for the Institute in general it still remains to be accomplished in Sub-Saharan Africa. This is all the more true in that Brother Paulin Degbé himself affirms: *"the decisions coming from the centre of the Institute arouse scarcely any enthusiasm in Laypeople."*⁹ Teachers in several reports to District Chapters have noted that they are not ready for association such as it has been presented in the writings of several Brothers. What then are the prerequisites for a true association? Who is asking for association?

Mrs Martine Coulibaly, a teacher at De La Salle College Ouagadougou, spokesperson for the lay teachers at the 11th District Chapter, said this:

"[...] But it has to be recognised that the work is not always easy for us Laypeople. We find ourselves in a group where neither our identity nor our role is clearly defined. There is a tendency to mix Brothers and Laypeople.

The Brothers are totally involved in this missionary work. It is their raison d'être and this is not the case for the Laypeople. We are evolving in a world that is in constant change. Socio-economic contexts have greatly evolved as have our needs. We are confronted with certain realities which somewhat restrain our impulse towards a stable and radical commitment. No matter what one's desire and sense of responsibility may be, it is often difficult to go beyond one's immediate personal interests. This sometimes creates misunderstandings, dissatisfactions and even frustrations, often resulting in departures."

The fundamental values of Church-family being able to bring a positive element to Lasallian association remain untapped in the reflection of Brother Paulin Degbé. He omitted showing how these values could help the Brothers collaborate with Laypeople as in a **community of faith, a family**. He thinks that Laypeople would commit themselves more readily to association if questions of salary, responsibility and social security were resolved. In effect he falls into a trap that he himself has set up in confusing association with communion of persons and team work to be set up.

Association as **communion of persons** goes beyond sharing responsibility and questions of salary and is to be found first of all at the level of vocation and the community dimension of the identity of the educator. If faith is present in the lay-educator the process of communion will lead him/her to live education as a place of meeting with God, as ministry, which requires stable and total commitment.

⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 142-143.

⁹ *Ibid.* p.10.

Brother Paulin Degbé has not perceived that he is preaching in the desert. Inasmuch as the lay educator does not have a Christian life project it would be abusive to demand of him/her or impose on him/her a situation which requires a specific Christian identity and a certain formation. It is a question of integrating oneself into a history in order for De La Salle to become the symbol, which unites Laypeople and Brothers. It is only an invitation addressed to all.

The anthropological approach of which Brother Paulin Degbé speaks has not been sufficiently spelled out or presented so that we can clearly identify what Laypeople are saying and what the Brothers are thinking.

From the points of view which we have just noted we can recall that on the pastoral level - the domain in which the work of Brother Paulin Degbé is situated - lay educators have as mission to lead the students to grow as humans and Christians. We need to leave aside the debate about questions of Lasallian association so as to think through the identity and role of the lay educator as witness to Jesus Christ at the school. We need rather to awaken Laypeople to the **importance of a Christian life project**. Without this project of Christian life accompanied by a formation process it would be hasty to come up with proposals about commitment of Laypeople. Association is to be set in a process of formation and transformation of the person who becomes an enlightened witness, a master of faith and of humanity. It is upon this base that we need to undertake the reflection. Otherwise we remain at the level of mere collaboration.

The vocation of the lay Catholic in the school is set in general terms within the Church, people of God. The lay Christian is invited to live and to express his/her faith within daily concerns. His/her identity and role in the school flow from his faith and from his mastery of all that is fully human so as to guide youth towards the only true master Jesus Christ. It is here that the real debate is set.

The Christian life of the layperson should be reflected in his/her works for transforming society. His/her Christian faith forbids the separation of union with Christ from daily life. In other words, the affairs of this world should not be unrelated to the spiritual life (Col. 3,17). The fecundity of the apostolate of the layperson demands a spiritual life, a "*soul supplement*" to witness to Christ. In the Burkinabe context Laypeople should be formed to prepare by themselves for such a life.

According to the conciliar Decree on *The Apostolate of Laypeople*, Laypeople¹⁰ who have become associated with Institutes or Congregations should strive to live the spirituality that is their own along with the spirituality of these Institutes or Congregations.

Laypeople are called to contribute by their initiatives, their creative efforts and their competent, conscientious and enthusiastic work in all activities and all professions of the world to arrive at "*all the people of God being able to distinguish between gospel values and counter-values with greater precision*"¹¹. It is this vocation of Laypeople in the Church, which enlightens and founds the presence of Laypeople in a temporal activity such as school education.

¹⁰ *The Apostolate of Laypeople*, n° 4.

¹¹ *Ibid.* n° 10.

Finally the mission of the Lasallian School is an evangelising ministry that presupposes that the one who seeks to undertake the work of evangelisation should have encountered and experienced Christ by means of the Gospel. Our aim is to initiate lay teachers into seeing in Jesus Christ the ultimate meaning and the perfection of their life as educators. The possibility is offered to them to opt for Jesus Christ, the Educator *par excellence*, and to allow themselves to be educated by His spirit.

Before and after his/her employment the teacher will be introduced step by step into a process of formation so that he/she might give his/her personal life a Christian orientation.

This life project is necessary because Lasallian establishments are Gospel lands which await adults so as to give beacons for Christian faith¹². They should fully realise themselves as persons and Christians so as to assist students to realise themselves in their turn. In the educational context it is the educator's life of faith which is so important and which underpins all his/her action. In Lasallian vocabulary it has to do with "*the spirit of faith*". The other element in the educational context linked to faith is the example of living, moral living as presented by Pope John Paul II: "*By the moral life, faith becomes 'confession' not only before God but also before people: life becomes witness*".¹³

The moral life allows the educator to be truly a guide, a reference, a witness to Jesus Christ before youth. It is in this way that the lay educator is to live out his/her educational task as "*a fundamental means of personal sanctification and of the apostolate*".¹⁴

We have shown that the lay educator who wishes to share the Lasallian charism should resolutely engage in a project of Christian life which presumes prior conversion and faith. We do not seek a Lasallian association where God has been evacuated thanks to the secularisation of society or because we wish to undertake a dialogue with other confessions and religions. The topics of religious pluralism and of intercultural living are aspects to be taken into account in order to respond to the needs of opening up, of the universality of the Church.

¹² *Gravissimum Educationis Momentum*, n° 8.

¹³ John Paul II, *The splendour of truth*, n° 89.

¹⁴ *The lay Catholic, witness of the faith in the school*, n° 61.