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ANNOTATION

Kopra, Gregory T. "The Experience of Lasallian Association on the Part of Lay 'Associates in Fact' in the District of San Francisco." Ed.D. dissertation, The University of San Francisco, 2012, 292 pp.

Gregory T. Kopra describes his purpose in the dissertation as "to explore the experience of association on the part of lay people serving in Lasallian educational ministries" (i). In order to achieve this purpose the author set forth four research questions: How do lay teachers in the San Francisco District who could be characterized as "associates in fact" describe the journey that led them to their experience of Lasallian association? How do these individuals describe their experience of Lasallian association? How do they describe the meaning of their experience of Lasallian association for them personally, both now and for the future? How do they articulate the future of Lasallian association in the San Francisco District? (11-12)

Kopra offers a phenomenological perspective as the conceptual framework for his research, noting that story-taking was the key methodology used for his research. In addition, Kopra claims that this is a fitting perspective since the Lasallian heritage of association can be viewed from the same vantage point of practice coming first, with theory following it as a result of reflection (13-16).

Kopra notes a number of areas of possible significance: this research adds to a very small body of recent research on an important issue in the Lasallian world; this research seeks to explain association from lived experiences rather than from definition and description; this research could open to Lasallian formators those things that would be most helpful for Lasallian educators in their vocational journeys; and, this research could be useful to other religious congregations (17-18). In addition, Kopra defines a long list of key terms, including "associates in fact," a category which is central to his research (9-10, 19).

Kopra's research method begins with an extensive review of three areas: the challenges involved with transmitting congregational school culture from vowed religious to lay people; the phenomenon of Lasallian association as a core element of Lasallian school culture from the origins in the 1680's to the present day; and, Lasallian association in the Catholic context of "communion ecclesiology" (26). These elements are important in light of the problem noted by Kopra, i.e. "since the laity comprise fully 96% of the people staffing and leading Lasallian educational institutions worldwide, it is natural and important to explore what Lasallian association could mean for lay men and women" (25).

Kopra's review of current literature on the transmission of culture (charism) in religious-sponsored educational institutions reveals contradictory conjectures about the possibility of extending charism in the light of the disappearance of religious (26-30). Likewise, the author's review of current literature on communion ecclesiology in the Catholic Church raises a potential disparity between that ecclesial vision and the current ecclesiological reality (70-74).

Kopra makes use of an in-depth interview research design in which the attempt is to get to the “essence” of a phenomenon. The population selected was from among 600 full-time teachers, professors, staff, and administrators from the educational works of the San Francisco District. Selection criteria included a lived experience of association and the ability to articulate that experience. Potential study participants were identified by three members of the District administration who interacted regularly with lay partners in mission. Two men and two women were selected by consensus (a back-up group was also selected). The four participants chosen in the first cohort agreed to participate in the extensive sets of interviews (78-84).

Kopra conducted three interviews of each participant and reviewed the transcripts of each interview with the participants. He also developed a meticulous transcription and data analysis process. That process included: studying, reducing, and analyzing the interview data; creating categories and themes; and, organizing the findings (100-104). This process allowed Kopra to present results of the study that pertained to each of the four research questions as well as themes and categories that emerged from the in-depth interview data. For example, in discussing how the “associates in fact” described their vocational journey, Kopra offered five themes (Engagement with the Lasallian Mission, Formation, People, The Power of Community, and Vocation); each of these themes was further broken down into either three or four categories, ex. The formative role of challenging experiences (111). This extensive and exhaustive reporting system led to a series of conclusions, implications, and recommendations.

For each conclusion (“a foundational aspect of ‘association in fact’”) Kopra offers one or more implications (“practical, concrete responses”) (222). Among the conclusions and accompanying implications noted in Chapter 5 are: association as a journey rather than a destination (hence, the need for increased community-building activities to foster association, the necessity of providing opportunities for laypeople to step into roles of greater leadership responsibility, and the importance of hiring for mission); vocation as the context for association—both the vocation of the Lasallian educator per se and the role of one’s primary life commitment in the experience of association (hence, finding ways to honor the primary life commitment and to differentiate from the way in which the Brothers experience association); and, accompaniment on the associative journey (hence, the importance of formative programs and mentoring).

Kopra offers both recommendations for future research and for future practice (239-244). Some of these hold particular importance for the Lasallian higher educational community. His suggestion of a research team to extend the same type of phenomenological research to other individuals and associative groups can best be done in a university context with a lead researcher. As regards practice, his suggestion about the necessity of training mentors or accompaniers could very well be addressed through the creation of a certificate program to meet the particular needs of such a leadership group. Kopra’s research is part of a small, seminal, but significant body of research on a key aspect of the future vitality of Lasallian mission.