

Associate Membership in the Institute

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Introduction

Developments in the Church and in the Institute in the last thirty years have resulted in a breakdown of the barriers that separate the vowed members of the Institute from lay and clerical persons associated with the mission and the tradition of the Institute in a variety of ways. This has resulted in a desire to be more closely tied to the Institute on the part of many who are not, cannot be, or have no vocation to become vowed Brothers. This makes it urgent for the Institute to consider the possibility of some form of membership for such persons for their own benefit and that of the Institute itself. As the average age of the Brothers rises and their numbers decline on the one hand and, on the other, the number of those associated with the Brothers in various ways escalates, it comes down to a question of whether the Institute is becoming smaller or in fact growing larger, perhaps by leaps and bounds. The opportunity of formally opening up the concept of membership now presents itself. The question is complex and the pages that follow will attempt to set forth the principal issues involved and suggest some possibilities for action.

Historical Survey

The Founder and the Tradition

Although association was an important concept in the charism and the practice of the Founder and the Brothers in the early years of the Institute, that association was limited to the Brothers who were members of the Institute. All the schools were staffed exclusively by Brothers and their communities were closed to outsiders of any kind. The association among the Brothers in the schools was an outgrowth of their early experience in the classroom that put an end to the traditional pattern of the isolated schoolmaster in elementary education. The association of the Brothers in their communities had a different motivation. Separation from "the world" was a major theme in the Founder's spirituality, as it was in the ancient monastic tradition of *fuga mundi* that found an echo in much of the spirituality of the seventeenth century. Religious consecration was defined in terms of leaving the world to live in community. Contact with outsiders, even with one's own family, was considered dangerous to one's vocation and even salvation. On his deathbed the Founder could say:

If you wish to preserve yourself in your state and to die in it, never have any familiar dealings with people of the world; for little by little you will acquire a liking for their way of acting and will be drawn into conversation so that, through politeness, you will not be able to avoid agreeing with their language, however pernicious. This will cause you to fall into infidelity; and no longer being faithful in observing your *Rule*, you will grow disgusted with your state, and finally you will abandon it.

Much as that attitude was a reflection of the times, there were other aspects to the Founder's creative achievement that carried the seeds of a greater openness to bear full fruit, perhaps, only in our own time. For one thing, the Brothers were not and were never to be priests. Their exclusively lay status, albeit in a religious community, established a permanent bond with the laity who today are emerging as a dynamic force for Church renewal. The exclusion of the Brothers from the priesthood had two effects: it removed the Brothers from clerical privilege and lifestyle while, at the same time, creating the need for relationships with clerics as chaplains, confessors, patrons and sometimes the owners and sponsors of the educational establishments where the Brothers worked.

It was their religious character that differentiated the Brothers from both seculars and clerics. But even here, the Founder did not set out to found a religious order in the traditional and canonical sense. In his lifetime he did not pursue either legal incorporation or papal approval for his distinctive community. The Brothers were free to remain in the Institute with or without vows; the early Brothers pronounced three vows: a vow of association to conduct gratuitous schools, a vow of stability, and a vow of obedience. These were not the vows traditional in the monastic and mendicant orders, but vows oriented to the educational mission, its flexibility and coherence, and its only guarantee of permanence. Even the habit was designed originally to distinguish the Brothers not only from seculars and priests but also from the monastic congregations. This new way of living a religious life in community, without the pretensions or restrictions of either the clerical or the monastic state, provides a basis in the Lasallian tradition for a more open relationship with those who share the educational mission.

It was, however, the separation from the world and the restriction of association to the Brothers that remained the official attitude and practice of the Institute well into the twentieth century. Beginning in the nineteenth century in the schools, however, new apostolic initiatives in the field of education, now exercised worldwide in varied cultural contexts, led to increasing but reluctant employment of lay persons in the Lasallian enterprise. Even as late as the General Chapter of 1946 this could be described as a "necessary evil." However, no such compromises were made in the practice of religious and community life. In fact, the nineteenth century saw an increasing absorption into the Institute of a monastic kind of spirituality. Monastic authors served as sources for spiritual reading and meditation. The Superiors followed the lead of Roman authority as it encouraged a kind of homogenization of religious life, minimizing the distinctive elements in the founding charism, and defining religious life, in the terms of the 1917 *Code of Canon Law*, as a fixed state expressed in the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience.

The result was a growing dichotomy between the apostolic ministry and religious living in community: the one diversified, contemporary, turned outward and open to change; the other uniform, antiquated, turned inward, and fixed. In the process, the integration that De La Salle espoused between "the duties of state" and "concern for salvation" was compromised. The effect of preserving out of context the letter of some of the Founder's policies and practices, was to sacrifice the Founder's spirit or, better, his spirituality, his apostolic spirituality, his "mystical realism," as it has been called. Sacrificed, too, was the integrity of the Brother's vocation, even to the point of considering the ministry to his students and his collaboration with his lay colleagues as a distraction from leading an authentic religious life. A Brother

was expected to be attuned to the contemporary world in the school and conform in community to a spirituality and lifestyle inherited from a remote century.

Over the course of the centuries, modifications in the religious habit of the Brothers – the lengthened soutane, abandonment of the wide-brim hat first for the tricorn and then the narrow-brim Roman clerical hat, a lighter mantle, and prominence for the calotte – all tended to blur the distinctiveness of the Brother’s habit – and consequent self-understanding – from that of clerics and other religious congregations.

In another direction, during the nineteenth century the Institute began to recognize its dependence on external persons by creating the category of Affiliated members, most often conferred on prominent benefactors, especially among the clergy, medical doctors, and providers of financial support. Affiliated members, and later those officially recognized as Benefactors, did not necessarily or usually become direct and ongoing participants in the Institute’s educational ministry, or its community life and spirituality. Considered as such, this “award” entailed no special obligations and focused for the most part on spiritual benefits both during life and especially after death. At least this was an admission that the Institute was not self-sufficient nor did it have a control over every aspect of its mission and the needs of its personnel.

Transition and Renewal Prompted by the Second Vatican Council

The worldwide dislocations, both geographical and psychological, occasioned by World War II had its impact on Church life in general and religious life in particular some twenty years later with Pope John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council. It became the responsibility of the successive General Chapters to apply to the Institute the call for liturgical and biblical renewal, the opening of the Church to the realities of the modern world, the recognition of the role of the laity in Church life and their call to holiness, and the renewal of religious life by a return to the Gospel and the charism of the Founder, as well as unprecedented attention to the signs of the times. Fortunately, the Institute had a head start with scholarly studies of the Founder’s charism already underway, Brothers being trained in scripture studies and theology, and a committee in place to undertake a thorough revision of the *Rule*. This preparation made it possible for the Institute in the General Chapters after the Second Vatican Council to open itself to the wider world around it, especially to those who wanted a greater share in the mission and in the inheritance of John Baptist de La Salle. It will be useful then, to trace briefly the decisions of the successive General Chapters relating to this unprecedented movement outward.

The Open Stance of Recent General Chapters

The 39th General Chapter (1966-1967)

In many ways the renewal 39th General Chapter represented a moment of discontinuity in the history of the Institute. Bypassing the traditions of the recent past, the Chapter tried to recover the dynamism of the original foundation in an effort to integrate the charism and vision of the Founder with the situation and opportunities of the contemporary world. In the process, it became possible to separate out from the Founder’s writings and experience, those elements that had permanent value and those that were historically and culturally conditioned by the situation

in seventeenth-century France. This was nowhere more evident than in the Institute's new openness to the world outside itself.

The foundational capitular declaration entitled *The Brother of the Christian Schools in the World Today* underlined the importance of integrating the religious and community life of the Brothers with their educational apostolate. It urged that communities be prepared to respond to the needs of people, to see the signs of God present in the world, and to overcome the risk of being closed in on themselves. It also urged the schools to be open to the life of the world and the Church. Among other new initiatives, the *Declaration* affirmed the positive contribution of lay colleagues in the Brothers' schools and opened up the possibility for Brothers to teach in schools not directed by the Institute. After extended debate, the Chapter accepted and endorsed the reality of co-educational Lasallian institutions. A provisional *Rule* was adopted that eschewed legalisms in favor of an appeal to values derived from the Gospel and the Founder's charism and adapted to the lived experience of the Institute incarnated in a variety of cultures. A new *Book of Government* established structures of subsidiarity to make adaptations possible on the local level. In short, the Institute began to realize that it could no longer operate in isolation or impose global uniformity if its mission were to be effective in the contemporary world.

The 40th General Chapter (1976)

The principal preoccupations of the 1976 Chapter were two: first, a more thorough overhaul of governmental structures than had been possible ten years earlier, a process that resulted in a totally new *Book of Government*; second, how to understand religious consecration and the vows in the light of the large numbers of dispensations from vows and departures that followed the shock of renewal, a process that, for various reasons, resulted in nothing very conclusive. But there was another concern that surfaced in the Chapter that was barely noticed at the time.

By 1976 the Chapter was able to take notice of initiatives that were taking place, apart from Institute control, among the former students and the present associates of the Brothers. In the very climate where the number of Brothers was declining there was noted an astounding increase of activity and commitment to Lasallian education on the part of lay persons, especially former students of the Brothers. Among many such movements of a local or regional character, there were two of international proportions that the Chapter was asked to consider. One was the World Federation of Lasallian Alumni (ex-alumni is the term in Europe where enrolled students are called alumni); the other was the *Signum Fidei* movement.

The movement to organize the worldwide Lasallian alumni associations began as early as 1958 during the International Exhibition held that year in Brussels focused on science and technology. The twenty three Lasallian delegations set the stage for the formation of the World Federation of Former Students of the Brothers. The statutes were approved at the 2nd World Congress held in Rome in 1960 with thirty six delegations present. The 3rd World Congress held at Barcelona in 1965 drew over 2,000 alumni from fifty countries as well as many Brothers including Brother Nicet, the Superior General. There were 1,300 present at the World Congress at Montreal in 1967, with Superior General Brother Charles Henry presiding. Brother Pablo, then Vicar General, attended the 5th Congress at Buenos Aires in 1972 with 2,500 in attendance. This Congress was notable for the number of young people present, who soon formed themselves into

the International Union of Young Lasallians. The initiative and organization of these Congresses, as well as the gatherings held by the related local and regional associations, was largely the work of the lay participants themselves. What had begun as a federation of associations of former students would from now on be known as the International Lasallian Confederation.

Aware of the significance of these movements, Brother Charles Henry took the initiative to form a "Mixed Committee," as it was called. This was composed of five Brothers (three of them Assistant Superior Generals) and four lay leaders of the associations. The committee presented its report on the Chapter floor, noting that "not only are former students members [of the Federation], but also the lay teachers, parents of the boys, young people of both sexes, pupils in their last year and all those interested in the Christian Schools." The report asks the Institute "to consider the associations as a specific field of the apostolic mission and to work for the promotion of a more intense Christian and apostolic life in its members in keeping with the degrees of personal commitment of the associates, a commitment ranging from a constant attitude of cordial sympathy to the total gift of self for the better service of Christian education." In this report and in all the activities of the association there is expressed a strong desire, not only to be recognized as participants in the educational mission, but also to integrate the apostolate with a living spirituality in the spirit of De La Salle.³

A second group that had emerged during the ten-year interval between General Chapters had been founded by Brother Paulus Adams, the Belgian Assistant Superior General, and had adopted the name *Signum Fidei*. Unlike the associations, membership in this group demanded a high degree of commitment in all its members. Its members "seek a spirituality based on that of Saint John Baptist de La Salle. They want a Lasallian way of life to turn themselves into a better sign of faith in their respective walks of life." They are aware that the spirit calls them "to bind themselves by a special vow to undertake, animate, and defend a spiritual education by all means available, and especially by the testimony of a personal consecrated life ... Members are ... people in the most diverse professions and different walks of life; men and women, married and single, adults and adolescents."⁴ In some ways this movement began to resemble either a kind of "Third Order" related to the Institute or, better perhaps, a Secular Institute derived from the Brothers' Institute, similar to that of the Union of Catechists of Jesus Crucified and Mary Immaculate founded by Brother Teodoro in Milan, formally recognized as a canonical Secular Institute in 1949.

The General Chapter witnessed an impressive ceremony as twelve members of *Signum Fidei* made their act of consecration during a Eucharistic celebration at which all the capitulants were present. The group comprised three married couples, four laymen, one laywoman, and a priest. Five were from Spain, three from Belgium, two from Italy, and the laywoman was from France. It is worth quoting their act of consecration to see the possibilities for developing degrees of association with the Institute:

Most Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, prostrate with most profound respect before your infinite and adorable majesty, I consecrate myself entirely to you to procure your glory as far as I am able and as you will require of me.

For which purpose I unite myself to the members of *Signum Fidei* to promote, sustain, and defend with them an integrated education founded on the person of Christ, in favor of young people and especially for those furthest removed from salvation in the spirit of Saint John Baptist de La Salle.

I intend to manifest this promise in an educational scheme for the realization of which I will work either alone or with a group by all the means in my power, with the help of the Holy Spirit and following the example of the Virgin Mary.

I promise to make the Gospel and its law of love the supreme rule of my whole life. And therefore agree to follow the Way of Life of the *Signum Fidei* association to which I firmly hold. Rome 5 June 1976.

The presentation to the Chapter by the “Mixed Committee” and the *Signum Fidei* both occurred on the same day. It must be said that, preoccupied with important issues still to be addressed in the short time remaining, the capitulants seemed to consider these sessions as an interesting diversion but without significant impact on the business of the Chapter itself. At that moment in history, the shortage of Brothers and the advancing age of the membership, although considered alarming, had not yet become sufficiently acute to motivate a search for alternatives to renewed efforts for vocations to the Institute. The delegates from the United States in particular were inclined to view these associations as designed for and relative to European cultures and not likely to find enthusiastic response among the Brothers in the United States. However, the Brothers who had been promoting and accompanying these associations, found encouragement to work for the growth of these movements. Brother Pablo, the Superior General, very soon after the close of the General Chapter that elected him, lent his support and his presence to the 6th World Congress held at Malta in August 1976. From this time on, the Spanish, under the moderatorship of Brother Manuel Olivé, assumed a leadership role in the Lasallian associations.

Meanwhile a development, circumscribed locally but with a wider potential, was the attempt in France to found a Lasallian Third Order that had as its objectives a close structural union with the Institute and the school; sharing in the Brothers’ mission; living in an “open,” i.e. mixed, community; and an adequate form of consecration.

From that time on the expression “the Lasallian Family” began to enjoy currency in Institute literature and dialogue.

The 41st General Chapter (1986)

The principal business before the 1986 Chapter was the adoption of a definitive version of the *Rule* after revisions made in the light of the required twenty years of experience with a provisional text. In the chapter of the revised *Rule* on the “Mission of the Institute” there is a section on the shared mission affirming that the Brothers “gladly” associate lay persons with them in the educational mission, that they co-operate in forming Christian teachers, that in the educational community “all the functions, including positions of responsibility are shared.” The Brothers are to offer to those who desire it a more intensified sharing of Lasallian spirituality, “encouraging such persons to make a more specific apostolic commitment.”⁵ In the chapter

entitled “The Vitality of the Institute,” a lengthy article sees the growth of the various Lasallian movements as “a grace from God,” and recognizes that the Institute can “associate with itself lay people who want to lead the life of perfection that the Gospel demands, by living according to the spirit of the Institute and by participation in its mission. The Institute is to help these persons and movements “achieve their proper autonomy” while it “creates appropriate ties with them.”

After the body of the Chapter, acting through the various commissions, had made its contribution to the revision of the *Rule*, the *Rule* Commission was entrusted with preparing the final text. The rest of the capitulants were formed into new commissions to deal with topics that had surfaced to be addressed as needed. One of these topics concerned the Lasallian family.

A message to the Lasallian Family was hastily put together and passed by the Chapter after much discussion. The General Council was entrusted with the task of developing a more thoroughly researched and nuanced message, which was published in February 1989.

These “messages” reveal how complex the reality called the Lasallian Family had become, a “family” including the Brothers, members of educational communities, women’s groups (Lasallian Sisters), lay groups inspired by the Founder, young Lasallians, parents, students, friends, especially Affiliated members and Benefactors, as well as the local and international Lasallian federations. In this diversity, there were two major tendencies that surfaced in the associated groups: one based on sharing the mission either directly or indirectly; the other, while also devoted to the mission, expressing a desire for closer union with the Institute, for a more intense community and spiritual life expressed in some form of consecration. These developments raised concerns about the role of the Brothers and the leadership in the Institute, the unique character of the Brothers’ vocation, traditional norms of religious community life as contrasted with the lifestyle of apostolic communities composed of men and women, religious and lay persons.

In the face of all this complexity the messages have a tentative tone. The stress is on recognizing and preserving diversity while aiming for cooperation in association; leaving the organizational initiative to the associations, while promising Institute help and support when requested; making available to everyone the various programs in Lasallian studies and formation; and greater initiative and cooperation at the local level.

Another significant decision of the 1986 General Chapter was to restore the language of the foundational Brothers’ vow of association in a renewed form as “association for the service of the poor through education.” Post-capitular reflection and discussions began to raise the question of whether the “together and by association” in the vow formula should be restricted to the Brothers or, as many urged, was a reality describing the relationship between the Brothers and those with whom they share the Lasallian mission. Could persons who are not Brothers but seem gifted with some sort of Lasallian vocation express their own commitment in the same language? In this way the language of association began to be tied to Lasallian Family issues.

These General Chapter documents and decisions contributed significantly to the growth of the various Lasallian movements that were already underway. Brother Genaro Sáenz, the newly elected Vicar General, took an official and personal interest in strengthening the Lasallian

Family movements, especially in Italy and in the Latin countries. In the Philippines, the *Signum Fidei* movement took hold and emerged as the center of growth for these groups of committed and consecrated lay associates. In addition to the Guadalupanas Lasallian Sisters founded in Mexico, similar groups of Sisters were formed in Thailand and Vietnam. The Institute of Brothers could no longer ignore the reality of their association in a worldwide Lasallian Family of diverse persons and groups in a diversity of cultures.

The new reality was made graphically evident in a video produced by the Pacific-Asian Region in which Buddhists, both men and women, were shown actively engaged with the Brothers in the Lasallian mission and equally committed to a spirituality integrating Lasallian elements with their own religious traditions. This video, directed by Brother Michael Rapatan, was viewed widely just prior to the upcoming General Chapter, not only in the PARC Region, but in Rome and other Lasallian centers. It had a profound impact on all those who saw it and was not without influence on the delegates to the 1993 General Chapter.

The 42nd General Chapter (1993)

As soon as the Preparatory Commission had decided that the theme of the 42nd General Chapter would be the Lasallian mission, it became evident that it would be impossible to do justice to such a theme without the participation of the colleagues who share the mission with the Brothers. Accordingly, a representative group of twenty “consultants” as they were called, men and women from all over the world, were invited to share in the deliberations, the community and prayer life of the capitulants, during the two weeks that the mission of the Institute was at the center of the agenda. This was a vivid experience of how far the Institute had come in its recognition of its own dependence on lay associates, as well as a chance to see first-hand the genuine commitment to association in mission and to Lasallian spirituality on the part of the “partners” represented by this group. One of them described the movement to closer association as “irresistible and irreversible.” The consultants made clear that they understood that sharing the mission would involve more than an auxiliary involvement or token presence in the mission. Sharing the mission would have to involve sharing in all the stages that make mission effective: planning, decision-making, implementation, and evaluation.

After the departure of the consultants, a special commission of Brother capitulants was established to draw up a report to the General Chapter on shared mission and a message on shared mission addressed to the entire Lasallian Family. It soon became clear that there were unresolved problems in the all-inclusive concept of a Lasallian Family that could embrace diverse groups all the way from student organizations to the communities of *Signum Fidei*.

Besides, the Lasallian Family was defined differently in different sectors of the Institute. Shared mission, by contrast, was easier to define and a fairly uniform experience everywhere in the Institute. Seeing this development as a “time of grace for us all,” “in the light of the experience of the last twenty years,” the General Chapter re-affirmed “the irreplaceable role of those men and women (lay persons, priests and religious) who carry out this mission. The Institute brings them together to work in association to procure a human and Christian education for young people and especially the poor.”⁶

In its report, the General Chapter urged that, for the future, all Lasallians together “consider Saint La Salle to be their common Father and point of reference; consider the District to be the ambit or framework of the Lasallian Family; organize Lasallian formation in its educational, spiritual and community aspects; strengthen the close relationship between ‘Lasallian Family’ and ‘Mission of the Institute.’”⁷ The General Chapter adopted the word “partners” to designate those who share the mission with the Brothers.

The Present Reality in the USA

Among the Brothers in the USA, despite a certain reluctance at many levels, high and low, to embrace Lasallian Family movements and the more radical implications of shared mission, there is a discernible growing recognition of the extent to which the future of the Lasallian mission in this country depends on the lay partners. It is possible to identify several significant experiences of what association in the Lasallian enterprise entails concretely.

- 1) In the schools and other apostolic enterprises where the Brothers were once a majority, they are now a minority and in many places are likely to disappear altogether. In some still rare situations Brothers no longer hold the major administrative posts. Often lay partners are the most articulate and effective in their concern to preserve the Lasallian character of an educational enterprise.
- 2) Brothers are beginning to feel increasingly comfortable and even enthusiastic as they share mission and community in a mixed environment comprised of religious, clerical and lay persons; men and women; personnel both permanent and temporary (including the Brothers); variously committed Catholics and those of other faiths or no faiths at all; dedicated Lasallians and those for whom the term Lasallian constitutes a threat.
- 3) The Brothers’ communities have become more open to other Lasallians in varying degrees and with varying frequency for social visits, meals, prayer, and even residence. Where there are volunteers involved in the mission, the community sharing is total.
- 4) In recent years laypersons and Brothers have been associated in programs of ongoing Lasallian formation, notably on the Regional level in the Buttimer and Lasallian Leadership Institutes; and locally in workshops, retreats, faculty days and the like where the integration of the Lasallian elements of prayer, mission, and experience of community are an essential part of the experience.
- 5) Many Districts have involved lay partners in planning for mission either in permanent staff positions or by participation in committees, including Chapter committees, and some role in the District Chapter itself.
- 6) Out of these situations, it is becoming increasingly common to hear expressed the desire of the partners to have a place in the structure of the Institute itself, a formal relationship with the well-defined privileges and responsibilities that prevail in any organizational structure. This raises the possibility of some form of membership for those who are not vowed Brothers.

The Question of Membership

In strict canonical terms the membership in the Institute, that is, the number of vowed Brothers, has been declining, as have the numbers of young men seeking admission to the Institute. The average age of the Brothers is mounting and a significant percentage is no longer active in the mission. At the same time the numbers of dedicated Lasallians who are not members is increasing, and a significant percentage of these persons are beginning to ask for a more committed, more permanent, more intimate association not only with mission but with all that the Institute can offer to those who are not vowed members. To meet this need, perhaps the time has come for the Institute to establish a new category of associates that would be different and closer to actual membership than is possible in the existing organizations that come under the umbrella of the Lasallian Family.

The Experience of Other Religious Institutes

The most successful programs of lay associates in the United States seem to be those instituted by the Maryknoll Fathers and the Jesuits. For many years the Maryknollers have had an intensive formation program for lay persons and married couples wishing to join the Maryknollers in the mission fields. The Jesuit associates likewise are recruited, screened, formed over a two-year period, committed by serious but temporary “promises,” and assigned to what could be called missionary situations, many of them in the inner cities. Among the Dominicans, the traditional “Third Order” approach has been supplanted by the concept of the “Dominican Family,” which includes a group of dedicated men spoken of as the *donati*, who identify with the Friars, who are willing to live the life, donate their talents, and eventually consider incorporation. Much publicity has been given in the Catholic press recently to the widespread development of associates in congregations of religious women where, it seems the distinction between vowed members and associates all but disappears in terms of spirituality, community life and mission.

In 1989 there was a meeting of more than a hundred directors of religious associate memberships that was recounted in an article that eventually appeared in the Review for Religious entitled “The Associate Movement in Religious Life.” In this article associate members are described as women and men, single and married, people of differing faiths, some clergy and members of other religious congregations. They are motivated to seek associate membership by a need to develop a sense of community, deepen prayer life, play a significant role in the community, and participate in decision-making, committee functions and Chapter meetings. A healthy associate program is seen as less dependent on formation and monitoring than upon the quality of the relationship between the individual lay person and the religious. The authors conclude that the more a religious congregation includes its associates in governance and community structures, the greater the commitment of the associates to the religious group.⁸

A survey of the many articles that have appeared describing or analyzing associate programs reveals two areas of caution that seem to emerge of the experience of the congregations. The most important one seems to be how to define the boundaries between the vowed members and the associates; how in the experience of sharing to preserve the lifestyle of each group, e.g. total and permanent commitment in a celibate community versus intermittent involvement, open options, and personal responsibilities outside the congregation; how to prevent the boundaries

from becoming barriers. The other area of conflict that seems to have arisen is structural and mostly financial in terms of insurance, liability, medical benefits, and the use of physical resources, e.g. automobiles. These concerns point to the need for a clear understanding of what association entails and what it does not.

Legal Constraints

The 1983 *Code of Canon Law* provides for two forms of consecrated life: religious institutes and secular institutes. The *Code* also provides for “comparable” institutes of apostolic life. The terminology is unfortunate and often misunderstood. All three types are characterized by religious living. Secular institutes in particular demand a strong religious commitment expressed by vows or their equivalent, and all three categories could appropriately be called societies of apostolic life in one way or another. The *Code* devotes 102 canons to religious institutes, twenty to secular institutes, and fifteen to institutes of apostolic life.

The Brothers of the Christian Schools were not a religious institute in the canonical sense until the *Code* of 1917 created the category of religious congregation, so defined by simple vows as distinct from religious orders with solemn vows. Prior to that the Institute of the Brothers was (and remains) an institute of pontifical right with simple and public vows. After 1983 the Institute had the option to redefine itself in terms of the available categories, but anything less than status as a religious institute was not seriously considered. A secular institute would be out of the question, not because the FSC would become “secularized” and less religious, but because the tradition of community and mission in association would be sacrificed. Although a case might have been made for the FSC becoming an institute of apostolic life, the Brothers had become traditionally accustomed to thinking of themselves as canonical religious, often even and erroneously as a religious “order,” and the religious vows of poverty, chastity and obedience had become central to the self-understanding of the Brother’s vocation, even though these vows did not form part of the Founder’s original structure. For the present, then, any question of extending membership would have to be regulated by the provisions of the relevant 102 canons on religious institutes in the 1983 *Code*.

David F. O’Connor in an oft-cited article in the *Review for Religious* entitled “Lay Associate Programs: Some Canonical and Practical Considerations,”⁹ stresses the need to be clear and unambiguous in determining who is and who is not a member of an institute, especially regarding important rights and obligations. *Canon Law* and the rules of each religious institute determine that membership is constituted by the profession of the traditional vows; thus only the professed are incorporated and are truly members. O’Connor’s first conclusion in this lengthy article is that with regard to lay associates, lay missionaries, and lay affiliates it is more accurate not to refer to them as members. “They are not members of the institute and do not have the rights and obligations of members.” He does, however, argue that “some adaptation and accommodations can be prudently made in community life so as to foster the work of evangelization with the added cooperation of lay men and women who are prepared to live and serve with them on a temporary basis.” He agrees that associates should participate in some way in decisions at the local level “that will affect their lives and their apostolate.” He adds that in “some real way, the associates are ‘members’ at the local level even though they are not members of the Institute.”

Possible Action for the Present

In view of the restrictive definition of membership in the *Code of Canon Law* now in force, it might be premature at this time to open up membership in the FSC Institute to persons who are not vowed, not only because of the canonical restrictions but also in view of the complex nature of such a move. As a step toward future possibilities, the Brothers individually or the District Chapter might want to urge the General Chapter at least to begin to study the possibility of creating a structure of Lasallian Associates, differing from any of the present alternatives: *Signum Fidei*, Third Order, Lasallian associations, and Volunteers. Such a proposal would demand much study and discussion. There would be needed well-defined criteria for membership (such as participation in Lasallian formation programs, association in the specifically educational Lasallian mission, and long-term commitment expressed in some form of consecration). Also, a well-defined agreement on practical matters such as participation by associates in the life of the local community, the District and the Institute would be needed: voice and vote on matters that affect the associates; the extent to which spiritual and especially material resources are shared; extent and limits of availability for mission; matters restricted to the Brothers alone and freedom for associates to pursue their options and responsibilities as lay persons, married or single.

On the District level, it might be advantageous, for those interested in such a proposal to take some preliminary steps such as the following.

- 1) Initiate a serious survey to determine how many persons in a given District might be interested in joining such an associate program; why their interest cannot be satisfied within existing structures, e.g. *Signum Fidei*, Volunteer Programs, etc.; what their expectations might be if such a program were to be implemented.
- 2) Undertake a detailed survey of the way such programs have functioned in other institutes, especially institutes of lay religious men with a specific educational mission, if there be any such beyond the FSC.
- 3) Undertake a survey, after adequate preparation, to determine how much support there would be among the Brothers of a given District for the Institute to establish such a program; survey, as well, other sectors of the Institute to determine whether existing Lasallian associations are adequate to respond to the needs of the lay partners or whether a widespread demand for a closer relationship has emerged.
- 4) In the meantime, try to involve lay partners as much as possible in the decision making process at the local level, including finding a way around the legal restrictions on voting by non-delegates in the District Chapter.

Quite independently of the outcome of any such proposals, the Brothers, individually and in communities, will be forced to realize that in these new situations of wider sharing the perception of their identity as Brothers will depend largely on themselves. No longer will it be possible for a Brother to hide his inadequacies under the corporate and comfortable cover as being “one of the

Brothers.” Each Brother will be challenged as never before, either alone or with one or two confreres, to bear witness to the reality of his total consecration, his commitment to his students and colleagues in the educational mission, and his positive contribution to the quality of community life. Identity will depend more and more on intrinsic factors rather than on collective and juridical categories.

Wider Horizons

Over the years, Brother John Johnston, Superior General, in his pastoral letters has been urging the Brothers to move from being re-active to become pro-active in the face of today’s challenges within and from outside our religious life. The question now is to what extent the Institute is prepared to become pro-active within the wider Church community to make it possible to seize new opportunities for effective religious living and apostolic mission that are being offered by a rediscovery of Gospel values, the Founder’s charism and the signs of the times. Pro-activity demands a willingness to change or abandon traditional structures, something that at the moment, in view of the operative policy among Roman authorities, is all but impossible not only for religious life but for almost every other aspect of Church life.

But this situation need not be forever. There have been moments of discontinuity in Church life before and there is reason to suppose, if the guarantee of the creative gift of the Spirit means anything, that there will be such again. The question is whether a worldwide institute incarnated in a variety of cultural situations and engaged in a specifically educational mission has the flexibility and the common will to re-examine its structure in the light of the challenges and options that loom on the horizon. More concretely, the question is to what extent the Brothers, who after all are the Institute, are prepared at least to consider for the future, certain ideological and structural revisions such as those listed below.

1) Can we shift the discussion on the nature and survival of “religious life” in apostolic institutes to a discussion of “future possibilities for structured religious living”? This would mean abandoning the definition of religious life as a fixed state, in gender homogeneous communities, identified by profession of the perpetual vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Religious communities based on other premises already exist. As a fruit of the 1994 Synod on Religious Life, the Apostolic Constitution *Vita Consecrata*, under the heading “New Forms of Evangelical Life” notes their existence in these words:

The originality of the new communities often consists in the fact that they are composed of mixed groups of men and women, of clerics and lay persons, of married couples and celibates, all of whom pursue a particular style of life. These communities are sometimes inspired by one or another traditional form adapted to the needs of society. Their commitment to the evangelical life also takes on different forms, while, as a general rule, they are all characterized by an intense aspiration to community life, poverty and prayer. Both clerics and lay persons share in the duties of governing according to the responsibilities assigned to them, and the apostolate focuses on the demands of the new evangelization.¹⁰

For traditional religious institutes such as the FSC, a variety of options present themselves. The Institute, as has been mentioned, already encourages such groups that take their inspiration from De La Salle and are dedicated to the Lasallian educational mission. But if the vitality and pro-activity is found largely in these new forms of religious living, then the question arises whether the Institute is prepared to consider more open ways of defining religious life itself and membership in it. There is also the question of what structures to retain (some structure surely is needed) to preserve the Institute's identity and missionary focus for transmission to future generations. Such considerations imply lobbying to revise and open up the present restrictions in the *Code of Canon Law* and in the policies of the Roman Curia.

2) Perhaps it is time once and for all to abandon the language and the mindset of “evangelical counsels,” the “life (or state) of perfection,” “the consecrated life,” and to speak no longer about “vocations” solely in terms of recruiting clerics and members for religious institutes. These exclusivist expressions imply the presence of an elite group in the Christian community, a sort of Christian version of “the chosen people.” It is salutary to recall that Israel and the first Jewish converts to Christianity, including “The Twelve” apostles, were unprepared to open up the Christian message to the gentiles until the apostle Paul, inspired by his encounter with the risen Christ and the power of the Spirit, forced the issue. There may be a lesson there for the contemporary Church, with its reluctance to adapt to American, African, Asian, and feminist preoccupations, and a lesson as well for religious institutes reluctant to break loose from traditional and juridical concepts of membership.

Likewise, it is a mistake to limit consecration to those bound by the vows of religion as if they alone could say “I consecrate myself entirely to you to procure your glory as far as I am able and as you will require of me.” The language of consecration as defining religious life was much employed at the time of the 1994 Synod on Religious Life, leaving aside for all practical purposes the undeniable consecratory element in Christian baptism. Thus José Cristo Rey García Paredes addressing the 1993 General Chapter could differentiate the Brothers as consecrated lay Christians (*christifideles laici consecrati*) from laymen and women as secular lay Christians (*christifideles laici seculares*).¹¹

Yet the co-option of consecration as the distinguishing mark of the members of religious institutes was already undermined in discussions on the reality of the lay vocation in the Church. The words consecration, sacrifice, and sacrament are all rooted in the Latin word *sacra*, which means “holy” or “other” related to the holiness of God who is totally “Other,” who alone is holy. Consecration implies separation from all that is not holy, but not separation from all that participates in the holiness of God in varying degrees. The theological basis for the role of the laity is precisely the consecration in baptism and the participation in the sacramental life of the Church. Therein is the root of the call to holiness, to mission, to a *vita consecrata*, a consecrated life of “otherness” as Christians. The difficult question to be faced, as the Consecration Commission in the Institute's 39th General Chapter (1966-1967) already realized, is to determine what it is precisely that consecration by vows adds to the more fundamental consecration rooted in baptism and the sacramental Christian life. It is interesting to remind ourselves that John Baptist de La Salle considered as consecrated all of the members of his Institute at a time when vows were optional and when many Brothers had no vows. For him, religious consecration consisted in becoming “other” by leaving the world to join an apostolic community.¹²

3) Since it is the consecration by vows that does in fact distinguish members of religious institutes from other consecrated Christians, it may be time to begin anew the discussion of what the traditional vows mean in practice and whether some alternate form might better distinguish the “otherness” that constitutes religious life.

This is not to deny that the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience do in fact address fundamental problem areas in human life about which the Gospel has something to say. There is a Gospel way of looking at possessions, poverty and the poor, the use or abuse of the sexual function, and the use or abuse of power and authority. And the Gospel message on possessions, sex, and power is addressed to anyone who wants to be called Christian. That being so, as with consecration itself, it remains to determine how effectively the vows differentiate vowed religious from other Christians without implying either privileged status in or separation from the rest of the Christian community.

There are signs that the religious themselves, especially in apostolic institutes, are beginning to question whether it is the reality of poverty, chastity (as distinct from celibacy), and obedience, that constitute the self-understanding of their consecration. It is mission in its Gospel sense energized in a prayerful community that seems to be emerging as the focal point of dedication and self-definition. At the same time, it must be admitted that many religious still take the vows seriously and would probably, if asked, want to maintain them even if they are not of paramount concern in their daily religious living. There are those for whom being professed “religious” with the three vows has become part of their self-identity. It may not be altogether futile, however, at least to begin to think and to dialogue about how to adjust the vow structure to take into better account the needs of today’s changing Church and multicultural world, the vocation crisis, the demands of the mission, and the experience of those engaged in new forms of religious life.

4) There is no question that even to consider such proposals entails a high element of risk, especially to the identity of the Brothers. In the presently unlikely possibility that such structures would fall into place, what would be the distinctive vocation and the distinctive role of the Brother? One possibility is that the Brother as a distinct entity in an Institute of mixed membership would effectively disappear, a loss that could only be justified if compensated by a wider community sharing, a more profound experience of religious life, and a more effective mission. Another possibility, one often suggested, might be to institutionalize different classes of membership with a core of Brothers (and Sisters?) opting for celibacy and a more permanent commitment to the community and mission. To this core might be entrusted the preservation and authenticity of the Lasallian character of the total enterprise, to be “the heart, the memory and the guarantors [but not the control] of the Lasallian charism,” to use the language of the 1993 message on shared mission.¹³ The least risky possibility would be to accept the status quo, to hope against all the evidence that the present trends will somehow be reversed. But that option might ultimately involve the greatest risk of all, the risk of increasing irrelevance and ineffectiveness, the risk of ultimate disappearance altogether.

John Baptist de La Salle lived with risk all his life and faced it with faith and creativity. In his meditation for June 11, he reminded the Brothers that they were like Saint Barnabas setting out to sea without oars, relying on the Spirit to arrive at an as yet unknown destination.¹⁴ In the

uncertainties before us, the Founder would remind us to address the Lord, as he did in the words of Habakkuk, *Domine, opus tuum*, Lord, the work is yours.

Endnotes

1. This essay appeared in an earlier draft in November 1998, but this is the author's revision of January 1999.

2. Brother Luke Salm (1921-2009) was a professor of religious studies at Manhattan College for more than half a century. He was the first religious Brother and non-cleric to earn a doctorate in theology (STD) at The Catholic University of America (1955). He was an elected delegate of the District of New York to the 39th, 40th, 41st, and 42nd General Chapters of the Brothers of the Christian Schools; and he was a noted historian of the life of Saint John Baptist de La Salle.

3. *Bulletin 239: 42nd General Chapter*, 218.

4. *Bulletin 239: 42nd General Chapter*, 215.

5. *Rule (1987)*, articles #17 to #17d.

6. *Circular 435*, italics in the original.

7. Cf. *Circular 435*.

8. See David M. Hynous OP, "Associate Membership in Religious Institutes," originally in *Bulletin on Issues of Religious Law* 6 (1990).

9. *Review for Religious* 44, #2 (March-April 1985): 256-267.

10. *Vita Consecrata* #62.

11. See *Bulletin 239: 42nd General Chapter*.

12. See "Consecration" in *Lasallian Themes* I, 9.

13. See *Bulletin 239: 42nd General Chapter*.

14. Cf. *Meditation* #134.1.