

Our Vow of Association

Luke Salm, FSC²

Well, here I am, back again in the Baltimore District, happy to be here, lured out of retirement by the charismatic persuasion of your Brother Visitor. The topic I have been asked to address is the vow of association or, more accurately, *our* vow of association. A great deal has been written in recent years on structures of association for our lay colleagues. It is still an ongoing discussion everywhere as the Institute looks forward to the General Chapter of 2007. Most of the literature that I have read on the subject either gives the vow of the Brothers short shrift or ignores it altogether. That is good reason to ask ourselves how our vow makes distinctive our contribution to the Lasallian mission in association with one another and with our lay colleagues.

In the tradition of the Institute, we consecrate ourselves to God by a vow of association for the service of the poor through education. That suggests six topics that we need to discuss. First, the history of the vow, and then how we view our religious consecration, association, service of the poor, education, and the future. We have all been over these topics many times before, and I can't promise that I have anything very new or original to add. Perhaps, though, to view them in the perspective of our vow of association may provide material for discussion for the rest of the afternoon and hopefully for implementation as we return to our respective communities and ministries.

Our vow of association dates from an Assembly in 1694, ever since considered the first General Chapter of the Institute, when John Baptist de La Salle and twelve Brothers made perpetual vows for the first time. Although the Founder had incorporated into the Brothers' *Rule* many elements from the rules of a wide variety of religious orders, he does not seem to have wanted to model his Society on any one of them. His was an original, if eclectic, creation with association for the mission of the schools as its dominant characteristic. His Brothers were certainly poor, celibate and presumably chaste, but that is not where he wanted to put the focus. The first vow, the basic vow that held them all together and gave meaning to their celibate and poor life, was a vow "to keep together and by association the gratuitous schools." This vow was supported by vows of obedience to the Body of the Society and stability. These were the only vows made by the Brothers during the Founder's lifetime and for some few years thereafter.

After the death of the Founder in 1719 the Brothers undertook to seek from Church authorities in Rome formal approval for their Society as a religious Institute (not a religious order). In the negotiations for the *Bull of Approbation*, granted in 1725 by Pope Benedict XIII, it seems that the Brothers themselves petitioned to add the traditional vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. The vow of association was reduced to a vow of teaching gratuitously. It may have been a matter of "keeping up with the Joneses," but it may also have been a mistake. The introduction and prioritization of the traditional religious vows obscured the originality of the Founder's vision. It led the Institute leadership to turn to contemplative authors and the monastic model to motivate the religious life of the Brothers. Little by little a dichotomy developed

between the work in the schools and the religious life of the community. Novitiates and retreat centers became the model of what our religious life ought to be. The vows were seen primarily as a source of obligations and a way to maintain religious discipline. That was what it was like for many of us in the old style retreats and houses of formation.

Meanwhile, the vow of teaching gratuitously had a rocky history. For one thing, there was a discrepancy between the vow formula (“teaching gratuitously”) and the language of the *Bull* (“teaching the *poor* gratuitously”). As the Institute expanded to new cultural and economic situations, absolute gratuity became increasingly problematic. Legal questions arose: What was the object of the vow? Teaching? Gratuity? Both? Who were bound by the vow: the individual Brother? The community? The Institute? Did the vow apply to all schools or only those for the poor? Who indeed are the poor? The result was long series of interpretations, rescripts, and dispensations from Rome during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to solve problems of policy and conscience.

It is no wonder then that in the renewal Chapter of 1966-1967 there was a move to get rid of the two special vows as they were called. Realizing that the Founder’s charism was notably embodied in the primitive vow formula of 1694, the Chapter decided instead to change the vow of teaching gratuitously to a vow of service of the poor through education. The accent was on serving the poor and there was no mention of association. But it was first step.

The next step was taken by the International Vow Committee formed to study various problems relating to the vows in preparation for the Chapter of 1976. The committee met annually over a three-year period. Considerable input was provided by Brother Michel Sauvage. He deplored the standardization that resulted from the medieval imposition of the not-so-traditional vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. He contrasted that with the originality of the Founder’s vows as expressions of how he wanted his Brothers to live their consecration. This led the commission in its report to suggest, among other things, that it might even be time to consider the vow of association as the one and only vow of the Brothers, incorporating all the values contained in the other vows. But the Institute was not ready. There was a strong reaction in some quarters, misinterpreting the suggestion as an attack on the religious life itself. In 1976 the proposal never even came to the chapter floor.

Ten years later the climate had changed enough for the International Commission for the Revision of the *Rule* to restore the vow of association to its proper place in our formula of consecration. The General Chapter of 1986 accepted the proposal without difficulty. And so it is that according to our current *Rule*, we now pronounce a vow of association for the service of the poor through education. I would still hope, as our committee suggested in 1975, that someday it might become our one and only vow. That is unrealistic now in view of the present controls exercised over religious Institutes by Canon Law and the Vatican Congregations.

In any case, a full development on the contemporary meaning of our vow of association already exists. It is to be found in the pastoral letter of Brother Álvaro, our Superior General, dated December 25, 2003 with the sub-title “Our Consecrated Life in the Light of the Fourth Vow.” He makes the point that in reality this vow is not our fourth vow, but our first vow, as it was for De La Salle and the early Brothers. He develops at length how the vow of association gives meaning

and specificity to the way we live community, use our money, sustain our celibate chastity, our obedience, and our stability in the Institute. I strongly recommend that when you get home you dig that pastoral letter out of the desk drawer, the library, or the archives and read it prayerfully at your leisure as a follow up to today.

So much for the history. We turn now to reflect on how the vow relates to our situation today. The first and perhaps the most difficult topic that needs to be addressed is the relation of our vow of association to the growing movement to extend our association to lay and clerical colleagues. We are all familiar with the challenge: if lay people can do all the things Brothers once did, if they can be associated for the Lasallian mission and share our Founder's spirituality, then why become or remain a Brother? One author has even suggested that our vow is merely an early phase in the evolution of association in the Institute, implying that the Institute may be evolving into a lay society for Lasallian educational ministry without vowed members living in community.³ That may be what God is trying to tell us in our present situation, but I for one hope that God is telling us something different. The primacy of our distinctive vow could be the best hope we have for a meaningful future. It tells us not only what we do but who we are.

The difference between our association for the Lasallian mission and that of our lay colleagues lies in the nature of our consecration. As the Institute aims to come closer to the mind and heart of John Baptist de La Salle we recover his insistence on religious consecration as more basic than the religious vows that express it. We have become accustomed to identifying religious consecration with the vows. Not so for John Baptist de La Salle. For him, consecration meant separating oneself from the world and one's family to join a community living according to the Gospel. In his *Meditation for the Feast of the Presentation of Mary*, addressed to all the Brothers many of whom would not have had vows, he writes:

It was by withdrawing yourself from the world that you consecrated yourself to God to live in this community ... you should consider the day you made this move as the one on which your happiness on earth began, to be completed one day in heaven. But it was not for that day alone you consecrated yourself to God, since you made a consecration of your soul on that occasion and since your soul lives forever.

Our vow formula makes this clear. The first paragraph of our vow formula is so powerful. To my knowledge, no other congregation has anything quite like it. It is a prayer that each of could profitably say every day:

I consecrate myself entirely to you to procure your glory as far as I am able and as far as you will require of me. And for this purpose, I promise to unite myself to the Brothers of the Christian Schools....

What do we mean when we say "I consecrate myself"? Do we mean something different than when we speak of the consecration of the bread and wine in the Eucharist? What the two expressions have in common is a radical change, a setting apart, becoming something very different. In the Eucharist it is the action of the Holy Spirit invoked by the celebrant over the bread and wine that effects the change into the body and blood of Christ. In our religious

consecration, we do the consecrating, we change ourselves into something different, but this too is prompted and made effective by the action of the Holy Spirit.

How do we consecrate ourselves? We do so when we freely separate ourselves out from a secular life. We are different because we have opted to live in an apostolic community of celibate men. We have declared our consecration to God and the things of God to be total and for our entire lifetime. To put it another way, the primary referent and lifestyle for the vowed Brother lies in his association in a religious community; for our lay associates the primary referent remains the family or independent living in the world. Some Brothers may live in community with lay volunteers or associates, but even so the Brother is different because by his consecration he has declared before God that his commitment to the mission is to be total and permanent.

I think our lay colleagues are aware of this difference. They may want to belong, to be part of the action, and even share the spirituality on occasion and to a point. But in this country at least they shy away from any move to turn them into something like religious. Not infrequently our lay colleagues must terminate their Lasallian association and ministry to meet the more pressing demands of supporting a family. And they are rarely available for mission beyond the area where they presently live.

The more it becomes true that we are no longer distinct from our lay colleagues in what we do it becomes increasingly important for us to put the focus not on what we do but on who we are. Our consecration by vow demands that our day-to-day existence have a distinctive religious character. People call us religious, not because others are not religious, much less irreligious, but because we are religious by public profession. By vow, we profess to develop a relationship to the awesome mystery that is God in a way that is more explicit, more continual, and more intense than people who are not vowed. This puts a new burden on us to make that not only real but visible to others in the way we pray, the way we relate to each other, the way we motivate the educational mission, the unique way we relate to the world around us.

This brings us to reflect on the content of the vow by which we express our consecration. Here the emphasis changes from who we are to what we do. We make a vow to associate for a specific mission that has its origins in the foundation of the Institute. It is inaccurate, or at best a sort of shorthand, to call it a vow of association. It is a vow of association for mission. Nor is it totally accurate to call it a vow of community. That is implied, of course, but by the vow we associate ourselves in the first place for the mission of the community that is the Institute. The life and ministry of the local community is indeed important. It is through our association with one another in a particular community and a particular ministry that we relate to the Institute at large. But we cannot forget that the ultimate purpose is to foster the global mission of the Institute, the reason for which the Institute exists. Our vow of association with the Institute should lead us to be more flexible and to think of our lives as available to go wherever we may be sent to further the mission of the Institute.

The mission of the Institute has two major components: service of the poor and education. It was the plight of the children of artisans and the poor that motivated De La Salle to establish the Institute in the first place. The poor are the principal focus of the pastoral letter of Brother Álvaro

that I already referred to. The sub-title I quoted refers to our consecration in the light of the 4th vow. But the main title of the pastoral is “Associated with the God of the poor.” The documents from the last General Chapter and the subsequent literature coming from Rome give high priority to the Institute’s commitment to serve the poor.

Sometimes, however, I discern a tendency to define Lasallian association in general and our vow of association in particular as directed primarily or even exclusively to the direct service of the poor. This ignores the fact that the incarnation of the Institute in various cultures over the last 300 years has uncovered new forms of poverty, and new ways of combating the causes of poverty through education, that were not evident in the Founder’s day. I do not think it is an evasion to refer to other forms of poverty. Your Brother Visitor has been quoted as reminding the intercapitular meeting in Rome in 2004 that poverty can be economic poverty, educational poverty, emotional poverty, religious poverty, or the poverty of powerlessness.⁴ Even the Founder hints at this when he speaks of the children being “left to themselves and badly brought up.” As all of us know, we have plenty of those even in our fanciest institutions.

It seems to me that the Institute at large and most Districts have made a great deal of progress in recovering this focus of the Institute’s mission bequeathed to us by the Founder. In our American Districts we can be proud of the 150-year history of our educational institutions at the service of the poor. The immigrant generations of Catholics have risen out of their poverty into the mainstream of social, professional and political life, due in large measure to what we did for them in our schools. Even today, we reach out to minorities by extensive financial aid and by trying to keep the tuition low. Our child welfare institutions continue to care for the neglected victims of economic and social circumstances. Our long tradition of financial and personnel support for the educational work of the Institute in Africa and Asia is a significant contribution to the direct service of the poor. Now we can cite new initiatives such as the network of San Miguel schools that reach out directly to the neglected youth from the urban ghettos where the alternative schooling, formal and informal, is neither Christian nor human. These instances should assure us that we don’t have to feel guilty about our lack of involvement with the poor. Even the fact that we sometimes do feel guilty is evidence that we care.

That does not mean that we should be complacent. Far from it. We doubtless need to do more, to “up the ante,” to get more directly involved with the poor. But we all know the problems. Projects such as San Miguel schools or parish schools in the inner city require generous younger men, willing to teach recalcitrant youngsters and share the living conditions of the poor. In addition, it is expensive to maintain a quality school that the poor can afford. To do more in this area and to give it the priority it deserves, we need to be creative with the resources that we do have and to trust that the Lord will help us find ways to do his work which is the purpose of our vow.

Our vow is not only association to serve the poor but a vow to do so through education or, more specifically, the schools. The original vow in 1694 had as its purpose “to keep together and by association gratuitous schools.” The gratuitous schools, the parish charity schools, were the place where the poor youngsters could be found. The *Rule* tells us that the purpose of the Institute is “to give a human and Christian education to the young, especially the poor” with the school as the privileged instrument. We are not the Christian Brothers or even the De La Salle

Christian Brothers. We are the Brothers of the Christian Schools. And we are not called to serve all the needs of all the poor. We are called to serve the poor by educating them. The poor in De La Salle's time, just as in our own, had many needs: food, clothing, shelter, employment, health care, provision for old age, death, and burial. But De La Salle opted to put all his energy in what could be done to change the desperate lot of poor youth by providing them with a practical schooling suffused with Christian values.

By our vow, we serve the poor directly by educating them. We serve the poor indirectly, but no less effectively, by educating the more affluent to the plight of the poor, to situations of injustice, to ways to eradicate the root causes of poverty. That is a daunting task at this moment in American history where the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. A question we have to ask in a Lasallian school is where we stand on the social and political issues that created this situation in the first place and threaten to make it worse. De La Salle opened his schools to turn away the young from the allurements of street vice to embrace Christian values. We are challenged to educate young people today to resist the allurements of consumerism, technology, and self-fulfillment at the centers of power. In comparison, De La Salle had it easy.

The opportunities we have to accept such challenges in our institutions of secondary and higher education make it worth the effort to preserve them. As with the schools for the poor, the question of personnel becomes crucial. In this period of transition we hope that we can hand over some of these institutions to our lay associates with the assurance that their distinctive Lasallian character can be preserved. But the question still remains whether this will be possible or even relevant once the Brothers are no longer associated with the institution.

One way or another education implies teaching. Our reputation for good teaching, built on centuries of shared classroom experience, is matched by none other. In the present shortage of personnel the priorities for assigning Brothers are most often to administration and support services. Rarely is it classroom teaching. But without Brothers in the classroom we cannot consider ourselves at the heart of the educational enterprise. And without Brothers touching the hearts and challenging the minds of students in the classroom we can hardly expect young men to be attracted to our vocation. We need to stress more often that the vow of association for the service of the poor through education implies that education takes place when there is good teaching.

The two aspects of our vow of association, service of the poor and education, outline for us how we are to accomplish the mission that is the object of the vow. They tell us what to do to express our consecration that tells us who we are. But now we are at a moment when our role in the doing is threatened. Our desire to serve the poor is hampered by lack of personnel. So also is our desire to keep alive the Lasallian character of our schools. We are beginning to realize that the mission can go on, and in some places is going on, without us. Many of our lay colleagues want to be associated with us for the same mission which is no longer exclusively ours. Does that mean that in the present situation our vow has lost its meaning? I think not and I hope not.

Apart from what we are, there are still things we can do if we concentrate on what we have going for us. The General Chapter of 1993 in its message on shared mission called the Brothers "the heart, the memory, the guarantors of the Lasallian charism." Thus our first basis for hope is the

person and the vision of John Baptist de La Salle. We have to get to know him better and make him better known, more than a name to invoke or a portrait to decorate our walls. There is no better and easily available way to get to know the Founder than through the Buttimer Institute.⁵ It is different from the LLI⁶ in that it concentrates three summers in a community setting to the life, the personality, the educational achievement and the spirituality of De La Salle. There are still many Brothers who have never made the Buttimer but could and should do so. Brothers are needed in the program to integrate with our lay colleagues and be living witnesses to how the Founder's charism operates on today's educational scene. In community there are new translations of all of the Founder's works sitting on the shelves waiting to be read. In the school, we can be visibly present in gatherings that address aspects of the common mission that our lay associates want to share with us.

Another thing we have going for us is our brotherhood. We are not fathers in any sense of the word. We are, or we ought to be, removed from the clerical culture that is such a problem for lay people in the Church. Just as we are different from lay people by our consecration, so we are different from the clergy with our title of Brother that symbolizes the rejection of paternalism, pretense, and privilege. This should be and usually is a point of engagement both with our colleagues and our students.

Above all, there is the witness of our consecration. The *Rule* tells us that "the first apostolate of the Brothers consists in the witness of their consecrated life." I think we sometimes underestimate the way people honor and find awesome our decision to renounce marriage, family, and a professional career in the secular world. If young people today are at all attracted to the unusual and the marginal, we can certainly offer something to them in that regard. Our challenge is to make sure that this perception of our colleagues and students corresponds to the reality.

That brings us back to the question of our identity, who we are. Brother Thomas Johnson, has developed the theme of the identity of active lay religious in an article entitled "Who Do They Say That I Am?" He concludes his essay thus:

We should clearly be spiritual men who can make an impact on the lives of others. We should be prayerful in a way that is evident to our Brothers and colleagues. Our simplicity should eschew the consumerism of the age and that should be evident in how we live, travel, and recreate. We should discern prayerfully together community and personal decisions.

Therefore, we will be a very small group. Essentially we are contemplatives in an active world, being who we are called to be. We embrace this mystery, not knowing who will come after us, if anyone, not afraid to invite others but placing it all in God's hands. Since we know the kingdom, after all, is God's work not ours.⁷

This is beginning to sound like another call to conversion and maybe it is, surprising as it may be coming from somebody like myself. I never wanted to be converted and I still don't like the word. It has too many overtones of fanaticism, elitism, and unreality. A better way to put it might be a call to embrace the challenges of the transition in which we find ourselves. We have already

experienced a whole series of transitions in our lifetime: from scientific innocence to the atomic and technological age, from an independent nation to an interdependent global community, from a pre-Second Vatican Council Church to whatever it is we now call Church, from the Institute we joined to the Institute as it is today. It should not be that difficult to accept one more challenge to shift the emphasis to what we have done and can still do, to how we can become what God wants us to be. Maybe God is not so interested in what we can do for God but what we can be for God and all of God's people. But whether doing or being, if it is to be Lasallian, I think it should be rooted in our consecration by vow of association for the service of the poor through education.

Endnotes

1. This address was delivered in an Assembly of the Brothers of the District of Baltimore on 1 October 2005.

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. That seems to be the direction of Brother Antonio Botana in "Lasallian Association: The Ongoing Story" in *MEL Booklet #2* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2003).

4. Quoted by Brother Thomas Lackey in "The Gaps," an unpublished paper prepared for the Lasallian Futures meeting at Friar Tuck Resort, NY in August 2004.

5. The Buttimer Institute of Lasallian Studies is a three-year Lasallian education and formation program conducted by the USA/Toronto Region, which is a Lasallian education and formation program begun in 1997.

6. The Lasallian Leadership Institute of the USA/Toronto Region, which is a Lasallian education and formation program begun in 1997.

7. "Who Do They Say That I Am?" in *CMSM Forum* 87 (Fall 2003).