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The French Experience of Association through Fraternities: New Pathways for Greater Commitment to the Lasallian Mission and Association¹

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1. Introduction

Dear Lasallian Friends, Brothers, and Partners, I would like to thank you for the invitation to share in this DENA District Assembly and Chapter with you. A special thank you to your Visitor Brother Bob Schaefer, to the provincial team, and to all those who have prepared this Assembly.

It's a joy to see many Lasallian friends here in the USA, Brothers and Lay Partners with whom I have had the opportunity to work and share ideas, convictions, and important moments (such as chapters, retreats, and sessions organized by IALU³ in Rome), or years of close collaboration with the General Services in Rome (while I was a General Councilor there).

Since the year 2000, my visits and meetings with the Lasallians in the USA have also shown me a fairly close proximity between the experiences of the last fifty years in the USA and in France. Despite the obvious differences in culture and education system, I have observed that the "Lasallian roads" traveled over the past fifty years in the USA and in France were quite close, closer perhaps than between France and other countries in Europe. And I think that we have a lot to learn from each other, with a view to enriching the living Lasallian tradition.

I prepared this morning's presentation with Colette Allix, who is our Brother Visitor's Delegate, that is to say the person appointed for the coordination and management of the La Salle Educational Fraternity. Some of you know her because she has been a member of CIAMEL⁴ for the last few years. It is in full agreement with her that I speak to you this morning.

I have been invited to present one of the experiences of association in France, association as it is lived out in the movement we call the La Salle Educational Fraternity. I do so with humility because this experience involves people who volunteer to take part, about 800 people in a large educational network of 150 educational establishments or ministries in France. I'll come back to this subject at the end of my remarks.

I do so with humility, too, because my visits to different Districts around the globe have shown me that each country, each Lasallian District, must find the formula for association and the forms of association that suit it, that correspond to its own unique culture and its own Church culture. The Secretariat for Association in Rome has sent us a number of diverse examples of association

in the past nine years. What I am going to present is, therefore, one example among others, not a model that would be imposed in other cultures.

2. A Greater Commitment to the Lasallian Mission and Association

I'll start with a brief review of the last fifty years of the Lasallian Family in France.

The Aftermath of Vatican Council II and the General Chapter of 1966-1967

As we all know, the Second Vatican Council, in the 1960s, rediscovered and highlighted the mission of every baptized person in the Church and, therefore, the specific role of lay people in the common mission of all baptized people. This new awareness came at a time when the number of consecrated religious and priests was falling sharply, and when lay people were being recruited en masse to work in schools and other educational institutions.

During those years, working together, sharing educational tasks, and then the progressive/gradual sharing of administrative responsibilities in the establishments, aroused curiosity about the Founder, about his life-story, his project, his vision, and his spirituality. What the Brothers had experienced in a routine way and without saying much about it had to be said, articulated, and expressed! Lasallian historians and researchers had begun to publish as early as the 1950s; they continued their work and published the fundamental studies that we still use today.

The lay Partners in the sixties, with their recent experience in the then “Brothers’ schools,” sought to understand the deep motivations of John Baptist de La Salle and the generations of Brothers after him. Thus began the systematic formation programs in Lasallian Districts, many of which still exist today, alongside others that have since been created in response to new needs and circumstances.

The benefits have been evident for decades: knowledge of the Founder and his writings; knowledge of the Lasallian story and its international mission today; passion for the educational mission and concern for the poor; acquisition of the meaning of Lasallian association; and the fruitfulness of a “community that generates new communities,” as Brother John Johnston, our former Superior General, used to say.

The Search for New Forms of Association, New Experiences of Association

From the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s in France, the association of lay people with the Brothers was experienced at the institutional level through the sharing of responsibilities, in particular the appointment of a large number of lay people as principals of schools and presidents of our five institutions of higher education. And in the 1980s, the Brothers began to invite lay people to participate in their Chapters on mission issues. The Brothers also took the decision to maintain the Trusteeship, in other words to keep within their network the ministries where there would no longer be any Brothers.

In the Institute (the worldwide Institute) during those years, with regard to sharing spirituality and a deep understanding of the mission, the Signum Fidei movement was born, an international

movement for Lasallian lay people, directed by themselves, but created by a Belgian Brother and a Catalan Brother. This movement did not develop in France, but it is still very much alive today in other countries, particularly Italy and some Districts of Latin America.

In France in the 1980s, a group of lay teachers wanted to create a kind of Third Order. It had about ten members for several years but did not continue. During the same years, the Institute launched the Young Lasallians movement. This has continued to develop and grow until now and, from it, the Lasallian Volunteers were launched in several Districts.

Then came the “Associates.” The idea and the word spread and are still used in many Districts. It is understood that these are the lay Lasallians who are most committed and associated among themselves for the mission, associated also with the Brothers when there are still some in their schools or centers, or associated within the Lasallian District to which they belong. This formula has developed in Europe and in France; but with years of experience, we have noticed that this formula was not totally satisfactory in the District of France for the following reasons:

Some saw in it the risk of forming a Lasallian elite: the Brothers’ favorites, those who would be promoted to interesting leadership positions.

Others saw in it too much imitation of the Brothers: they had a formula of commitment modelled on the Brothers’ formula of vows and they saw the risk of confusion of vocations, of establishing a new hierarchy of vocations.

Finally, the Lasallians of France, Brothers and lay people, expressed the wish to value each vocation for what it is, for what is different about it, what is unique about it, what makes it complementary to the others in the exercise of the mission and the presence among young people.

In France, Lasallian teams were set up, groups of teachers who volunteered to share their experience in education and sometimes the Lasallian heritage, but it was found that there was no explicit space for Christians. Something was missing.

To sum up briefly the situation before the fraternity movement started and over the last ten years or so, one could say the following:

Models from other Districts are interesting, but they cannot necessarily be transposed to other Districts.

Christian teachers and educators want to get together to share their experience of education as Christians, to talk about their experience through the eyes of faith.

But this does not exclude meetings and other forms of sharing with non-Christian teachers, and above all training for all. Lasallian formation in France can be summed up as follows:

A one-day introduction to the La Salle network for new teachers, followed by six days of initiation into Lasallian culture where teachers and educators familiarize themselves with

the Lasallian education project. Others invited by their school principals will participate in a program at the French Lasallian Center in Paris: five two-day sessions per academic year over two years. Finally, a group of teachers volunteered a year and a half ago to do a university research project on Lasallian education.

All these formulas, good but limited, led the Lasallians of France to create the La Salle Educational Fraternity. This is what I am going to talk to you about now.

3. The La Salle Educational Fraternity

To start with, two notes will help clarify what we're talking about. First, the Institute's 42nd General Chapter of 1993 defined the Lasallian Family as follows:

The Lasallian Family refers to all those who participate in the Lasallian educational project, especially those who enter into a process of sharing the spirit and mission of Saint John Baptist de La Salle.⁵

The *Declaration on the Lasallian Educational Mission* of 2020 also gives a similar definition.⁶

In France, we understand the expression Lasallian Family a little more broadly. We refer to what Brother John Johnson called circles of belonging, concentric circles. Those closest to the center are those who actually work in the Lasallian mission, but there are also friends and supporters of the Lasallian work, former students, benefactors, parents of students, etc.

Second, concerning the word fraternity, we are obviously not, in our case, talking about student organizations which are referred to in the USA as fraternities or sororities on university campuses; but I think we would agree with some current definitions of the word *fraternity* in today's English dictionaries.

In the Oxford English Dictionary, we find the following: (a) a group of people sharing a common profession or interests; (b) friendship and mutual support within a group (similar words could be brotherhood, fellowship, kinship, friendship, companionship).

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary says: a group of people associated or formally organized for a common purpose, interest, or pleasure.

Couldn't we say that these definitions correspond to our experience? I think they do. What's more, in France the word *Fraternité* is part of the motto of our Republic, so it has a special resonance.

The Creation of La Salle Educational Fraternity

In France, the District Chapter of July 2010 approved the following proposal from the French Lasallian Mission Assembly that had taken place just before the Brothers' Chapter:

The creation, within the District of France, of the La Salle Educational Fraternity, in order to actualize the Lasallian charism, to promote the Lasallian educational mission and to ensure its continuity in order to respond to the current educational needs of children and young people, especially the disadvantaged.⁷

Indeed, the Lasallians in France think that the La Salle Educational Fraternity, uniting both institutional and spiritual dimensions, responds to this call and decision. This La Salle Educational Fraternity is, therefore, a new reality in the District. A reality that officially began some ten years ago. It was promoted and encouraged by the Brother Visitor and by all the Brothers of the District, and it has been promoted by the successive Brother Visitors since then.

Indeed, if we are convinced that John Baptist de La Salle created a new fraternity for the education of the poor, how can we not think of a new fraternity today, a wider fraternity, whose members, in the diversity of their states of life, recognize as a gift to the whole Church the Lasallian charism, the charism of the Founder and the first Brothers, that of the first generations of Brothers after the Founder, and, after three centuries of growth, that of the Brothers and lay people over the last sixty years?

The La Salle Educational Fraternity, which encompasses in an inseparable way the spiritual dimension and the institutional dimension, allows the lay Partners and the Brothers to make the Lasallian charism their own today, to receive and understand it as a gift of the Spirit to the Church for the mission, a gift rooted in the Gospel and in the journey lived by John Baptist de La Salle with the first Brothers. Is this not a theological place? It is indeed!

It seems to us that this fraternity is the formula best adapted to the realities of our District. It respects and promotes the vocation and lifestyle of each person (Brother, lay man or woman, single or married, parent, grandparent . . . consecrated religious from another Congregation, priest interested in the Lasallian educational project, etc.). The Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools and its documents speak of an “intentional community,” sometimes without defining it properly. It is healthy not to define it too quickly and to leave space for varied experiences. We note that it does not mean the same thing in different countries. In our country, it does not mean that people with different vocations live under the same roof, which would mean in the same house. It means that Lasallian people are aware of their association in the mission or are going to associate around the Lasallian educational project and the project of a given school or center, in order to implement it, to live it, to promote it for a more effective service of their students. In other cases, they will associate in order to create a new ministry or a new educational experience. Each person maintains his or her own family or community life.

The La Salle Educational Fraternity strengthens our association for the mission and, at the same time, nourishes the spiritual life of individuals and enriches educational teams. Being a member of the La Salle Educational Fraternity gives meaning to the commitment to the mission and helps us to live it better together.

The Organization and Structuring of the La Salle Educational Fraternity

Members

The local fraternities are inter-institutional. Whenever geographically possible the members come from different schools or ministries; and so the sharing is richer and the sense of the network, the sense of belonging, gets stronger. Some members will commit themselves to remaining in the fraternity group for a year or two. But for many, the commitment is informal.

After sufficient time in the local fraternity in order to become familiar with the objectives and aims of the La Salle Educational Fraternity, each member can respond to the call to commitment that the Brother Visitor sends to all the groups. The persons who wish to commit themselves formally write to the Brother Visitor and then express their commitment for one year or two during a celebration within their local fraternity or during an inter-fraternity gathering in the delegation. (Delegation here means part of the network with two, three, or more ministries.) The commitment is received by the Brother Visitor or his representative.

The members can renew their commitment for two years, after having expressed their intention to do so to the reference person for the local group. The reference person, or local coordinator if you like, forwards the request to the District coordinator called Delegate of the Fraternity. The new commitment is then expressed publicly in the local fraternity or during regional or national meetings. The renewal is, once again, received by the Brother Visitor or his representative.

Those who exercise a specific responsibility in the La Salle network, such as the school principals or the delegates of Brother Visitor who accompany a number of ministries in a given region, are strongly encouraged to become members and formally committed members of the La Salle Educational Fraternity.

Meetings

Concerning the life of the fraternity or the fraternity experience, the members of a local fraternity will meet regularly (four to six times during the academic year). They pray, they meditate, and they share what they experience at the heart of their educational mission, their daily work, and commitment in the school or education center.

On certain occasions and or for certain events, the local fraternity can invite spouses, families, and other colleagues or Brothers. This participation, as guests, does not make these guests members of the local fraternity.

Each local fraternity maintains its vitality through meetings, articulating the local, the regional, and the national levels. The experience and the frequency of meetings shows this vitality.

Frequency of Meetings

Fraternities will meet locally at least three times a year, more generally four to six times a year as I have said before, depending on the distances between the schools. At regional level, they meet once a year; and at national level, they meet once every two years.

The calendar of the fraternity should, as far as possible, be established at the last meeting of the local fraternity for the following school year, and be transmitted to the Heads of the schools and the District Fraternity Council. The Heads of the schools have to take this calendar into account when they establish their own school calendars.

Content of Meetings

Each meeting—local, regional, or national—is composed of three successive moments (not necessarily in this order): (a) a time of prayer; (b) a time for sharing and rereading what we live, what nurtures and enriches our commitment in education; and (c) a social time. These meetings are regarded as a blessed time of reflection.

The sharing during the meetings can be based on a theme, an event that happened on a campus, a Gospel text, a text from the Lasallian tradition, a meditation of the Founder, a recent and interesting study or article on education selected and proposed by one of the participants, etc. It is, therefore, to be distinguished from evaluation, which measures and quantifies the experience. It is an intellectual and spiritual exercise done in a spirit of community by brothers and sisters who intend to read the reality they live with the eyes of faith.

Texts, articles, and resources for sharing and prayer are also sent regularly to the local fraternities by the Council of Fraternities. These texts may be articles written by current Lasallian formators, or selected from within the Lasallian or Christian tradition, or current articles about the Church and education or Institute documents and circulars.

The prayer is led in turn by the members, who do so according to their own spiritual sensitivity, allowing for a diversity of forms.

At the regional or national level, specific times of formation for the fraternity members are encouraged. They are specific in the sense that they are different from the Lasallian formation offered to all the members of the District's La Salle education network. These are times for deepening one's understanding of the Lasallian charism and the Christian Tradition, and times for sharing between the different local fraternities.

Structures of Government and Accompaniment of La Salle Educational Fraternity

The sharing of the charism and institutional support are intimately linked in the Lasallian tradition. Under the responsibility of the Brother Visitor, who is the authority of Trusteeship (you would say sponsorship in the USA), the structures of government and animation articulate these two realities.

In order to accompany the fraternity movement, we have a reference person at local level. It can be a new person every year. At the District level, there is the Fraternity Coordinator or Delegate. This is the person who has been appointed and delegated by the Brother Visitor for this important mission in the District. This is currently the job of Colette Allix. She is a member of the District Mission Council.

Additionally, there are the Lasallian formation courses and sessions offered to all in the District that I have mentioned above. And there is also the important and much-appreciated national gathering every two years. The next one will take place at the end of October 2023.

And there is also the Fraternity Council, which gets information and requests from the local level. Its role is to assist the Fraternity Delegate in her mission and to propose tools for animation and formation. The council also reflects on the future and the evolution of La Salle Educational Fraternity. It is representative of all the local groups or fraternities in the delegations or sectors of the District. This council reports to what we call the Trusteeship Council, which is like the District Mission Council advising the Brother Visitor.

Fruits and Benefits of the La Salle Educational Fraternity

What are the fruits and benefits of these fraternities? Well, there is a stronger spirit of association in the District and the sense of the Christian's educational vocation as a baptismal vocation. There is also the joy experienced by the members of the fraternities of coming together as brothers and sisters in the same mission. They provide a strong mutual support to one another. Members telephone each other, write to each other, prepare meetings together, and develop a sense of local community, especially when there is no longer a community of Brothers present. Often, members of the fraternities feel the absence of the Brothers; and they still desire the presence of the Brothers. However, they get, by way of the fraternities, a stronger sense of community among themselves.

4. The Challenges of Tomorrow

In the context of "private" but contractual education in the French system of education, our schools receive teachers with different motivations. Our schools in France are said to be private, but they are really only semi-private. We work within the framework of a contract with the State and a strong coordination of Catholic education by the dioceses, which does not give us the freedom to recruit our teachers.

Questions and Limits

Consequently, we're faced with many questions. How can we ensure that the Christian and Lasallian community bears witness in a school? How do we invite other teachers and new teachers to join a local fraternity, or even to understand what we mean by "mission"? How to transmit and then implement the orientations of the District's Mission Assembly and the International Mission Assembly? How can we promote all Lasallian vocations and convey the awareness of our common responsibility for the future of the Lasallian mission in the Church and in the society in which we live?

In the Church, we understand that every charism is a gift for the life of the community and of all the Church. It is not a talent to be buried, but a lamp to be put on the lampstand so that the whole household is in the light.⁸ The same is true of the Lasallian charism.

Civil and Canonical Status

After our ten years' experience with the La Salle Educational Fraternity in our District, we have come to understand that it is gradually becoming the educational "body" that will ensure the existence and implementation of the Lasallian mission in our District. The Brothers—the few Brothers—and the convinced and committed lay Lasallians believe that Christ does not cease to accompany them on the journey of their lives and in their mission.

We see four main challenges for today and tomorrow: First, the consolidation of a new body of trained and associated Brothers and lay Partners who will "carry" the network tomorrow, in the spirit of a synodal Church. Second, convincing the bishops of the validity of what we are doing, beyond the statutes for all Catholic schools that they have promulgated. It is interesting to note that several bishops are interested in what is happening in our network and in the experience of the La Salle Educational Fraternity. They ask us about it and show their interest in this experience. Before their most recent *ad limina* visit to Rome, some of them even asked Collette, the Delegate of the Fraternities, for some statistics and details about our movement. At the same time, canonists in France have also advised us not to seek canonical recognition. They tell us that sharing the mission and responsibilities, as we are doing at the moment, even with very few Brothers, gives us great freedom of organization and life among ourselves. Third, to make the body of fraternities, the La Salle Educational Fraternity, the body of the Trusteeship of the La Salle network. Fourth, in French Catholic education with its strong structure, to continue to demonstrate the unique contribution of the Orders and Congregations in education, and the relevance of their charisms, at a time when some believe that they are disappearing or would even like to see them disappear.

Lasallian Vocations

Rightly and for decades, we have all wanted to promote Lasallian vocations in all their diversity. We want to call young men and women to become teachers, educators, catechists, etc. But the Brothers and the lay Lasallians in my country are convinced that a special effort must be made to call some of them to consecrated life, to call some young men to the life of a Brother. Nobody must be missing in the family! The lay Partners of the La Salle Educational Fraternity themselves say that without Brothers the project would not be lived in its entirety, completely. Neither would it without lay Partners, the lay Lasallians of today.

The Brothers, by vocation, enter into the form of life that De La Salle himself wanted and instituted. Thanks to the vows of obedience and stability in the Institute, they are not bound by the logic of a long career in a single place. Paradoxically, they are mobile and stable. They are mobile, especially in their young years; and they are also the stable group that has enabled *the work of the schools* to last for more than three centuries. And by their vow of association, the Brothers bear witness to the strength and depth of association for the mission!

In France, many Brothers are also committed to the La Salle Educational Fraternity. Each vocation and each form of life is respected. One commitment does not compete with another; we need to think in terms of enriching each other and, above all, of pooling all our strengths.

Is Participation in the Fraternity Reserved for Christians?

Some people who are not Christians have asked to join a local group. They were gladly admitted, but the identity of the group was clearly presented: the prayer that will be shared is clearly a Christian prayer and the formal commitment is only made by Christians, since they are committing themselves in the name of their baptism to bring a Christian project to life. On the basis of a clear and well-understood identity, the experience continues to be a positive one.

Some members of the fraternities have found their way back to a more intense Christian life. Some were living at a great distance from the Church, or had stopped practicing altogether, or came from a Christian background but had no experience of life in a Christian group. Some new members of the fraternities who did not come from a Christian background asked for baptism. This was not at all foreseen at the beginning. Today, these people, I could say these new sisters and brothers in the mission, share the concern for evangelization in schools.

5. Conclusion

Let's remember our call! Why are we here? Why is there an educational mission? Why is there a Society of Christian Schools? Why have we been called?

When I have the opportunity to speak to teachers, I like to quote these first lines of the *Common Rules* that John Baptist de La Salle left to the Brothers. I haven't been able to find the official English translation, published in the complete works and probably done decades ago by an English Brother; so instead I offer you a translation by an automatic translator, which I have reviewed, trying to be as close as possible to the French original:

The purpose of this Institute is to give children a Christian education, and it is for this purpose that schools are held, so that the children, being under the guidance of teachers from morning until night, these teachers can teach them to live well, by instructing them in the mysteries of our holy religion by inspiring them with Christian maxims, and thus giving them the education that suits them [one could say that they need, or that will be good for them, or that they deserve].⁹

I think you will agree with me that each expression in the above text could deserve a long essay of explanation, perhaps a long dissertation. If we were to consider the phrase the "purpose of this Institute," how might we define it today? Or the phrase "under the guidance of teachers from morning until night," what might we be able to say about online learning? Or the phrase the "teachers can teach them to live well," what might that mean today? Or concerning the phrase "mysteries of our religion and Christian maxims," pastoral ministers, please, help us here!

And so dear Lasallian friends, if we recognize that God's Providence has brought us into contact with the Lasallian Family and has called us to the mission of education, we give God thanks and we commit ourselves to continue together, through the bond of fraternity, to serve the young and the poor entrusted to us. The bond of fraternity is essential. This bond can be lived and expressed in different ways. The Institute helps us to understand what fraternity means after more than three centuries of Lasallian experience; but it is up to each District, according to its own unique culture and its Christian culture, to find the forms that suit it, or that it needs.

This Assembly is a welcome opportunity to strengthen this bond of fraternity and to enter more resolutely into the great movement of association, for the good of the young people of today, *so the next generation* will know what generations of Lasallians before them have known and what we now know and live today.

¹ These remarks were originally prepared for presentation on July 27, 2023, at the DENA Chapter and Mission Assembly.

² Brother Claude Reinhardt, FSC, of the District of France and French-speaking Europe was a General Councilor of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools for two terms (2000-2007 and 2007-2014). He recently completed service as the Auxiliary Visitor of his District and now lives in France.

³ International Association of La Salle Universities.

⁴ International Council for Lasallian Association and the Educational Mission.

⁵ *Circular 435: 42nd General Chapter* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 1993), proposition 3, page 50.

⁶ *Declaration on the Lasallian Educational Mission: Challenges, Convictions, and Hopes* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2020).

⁷ Proposition 13 of the District Chapter in France.

⁸ Cf. Matt 5:15.

⁹ For an English-language translation of De La Salle's *Common Rules*, see "Rule of 1705," in *Rule and Foundational Documents by John Baptist de La Salle*, edited and translated by Augustine Loes, FSC, and Ronald Isetti (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 2002, chapter 1, article 3, on page 14.