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LASALLIAN ASSOCIATION

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This article and the following one are part of a talk given by the author, Francis P. Coughlin, an ex-Brother. He is at present the Educational Coordinator for the St. Gabriels' Hall in Audubon. The various headings are ours.

Introduction

I need to begin, although is not a good way to do so, by stating two qualifiers and one apology.

My first qualifier is that my remarks are addressed almost exclusively to the lay people present. I hope the Brothers and others will not be offended. There is much to say on the topic and I have limited time and have to develop a focus for myself. My remarks do have implications for the Brothers, but I think they would best be stated by others.

My second qualifier is: I am not a theologian, nor am I an expert in Lasallian matters. I do have long familiarity and great love and respect for things Lasallian, but even all of these things together do not make me an expert. I am, therefore, open to and would welcome corrections in either my facts or my interpretations.

My apology is that I am going to speak from a prepared text. I am a lecturer and rarely speak in this way, and I think I may be a little uncomfortable doing so. I am doing so in order to cover my material in the time allotted. I consider myself first and foremost a teacher, and prefer speaking from notes and would much prefer the give and take of the classroom setting. I ask that you be patient with this approach.

The lay state

Let's start by putting a couple of things in context and perspective.

The first context and perspective we must establish is one which concerns us, the laity. Up to Vatican II and to a large extent since Vatican II, and in opposition to Vatican II, there was a theology of laity which emphasized our instrumental value to the hierarchy of the Church. Such a theology stresses our role as helpers to the hierarchy, to the clergy, even to the Brothers in accomplishing their mission, the Church's mission to the world.

Since Vatican II there have been a number of other theologies of the laity put forth, all of which are only more or less satisfactory, because, I think, they continue to be theologies of laity and not theologies for laity. The real need is for a new integrated theology of Church. You and I, however, cannot do much about that.

Both the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church and the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity in the documents of

Vatican II make it clear: We (lay people) do not belong to the Church, nor do we have a role in the Church. Through baptism we are the Church. Through baptism and confirmation we are called and gifted. Through baptism and confirmation, in union with Jesus Christ, our mission is the mission of the Church itself. The dignity of who and what we are, the dignity of what we do is rooted in and rises out of our baptism and confirmation. We are an ecclesial people and we are sacrament to the world. The awareness of that reality must be for us an ever growing awareness. I make a strong point of this fact now because it must be a basic assumption in our discussion and understanding of the idea of association. If the concept of association is translated into actual practice in our schools, it will be of the utmost, even critical, importance that we be aware of the reality of who and what we are.

Association

The second context and perspective we must establish is that of association itself. For us the term association does not have very strong denotations, nor very inspiring connotations. It is a rather weak neutral word. We will, hopefully, in the coming years change that. It will come to have a weight, a significance, an import similar to that which it has always had for the Brothers. You may be aware that Association is one of the vows each Brother professes and renews throughout his life. This vow of Association the Brothers profess traces its origin back to the very foundations of their Institute. In 1694, John Baptist de La Salle with twelve laymen (the first Brothers) pronounced three vows: Obedience, Association and Stability. I have prepared a copy of that vow formula in English for you to examine. You will note there are no vows of poverty or chastity. They came later. The first three vows were practical and highly functional in their purpose. These twelve men were laymen. De La Salle alone was a priest, the only priest-brother in the 300 year history of the Brothers. The three vows had as their very practical purpose the provision of manpower for the maintenance of free schools. These men were associated together to keep free schools for the poor.

Men who were not Brothers i. e., not bound by the vows of obedience, association and stability, have always, from the very beginning, been associated with the Brothers in their work. We know this from De La Salle himself in the Memoir on the Habit written in 1690. But, it is evident that the association was limited, and, it seems, somewhat distant.

The term association for the purposes of maintaining schools, has for the most part over the past three hundred years been applied specifically and exclusively to the Brothers. Association truly has been and is a characteristic of the Lasallian School, but until now it has not technically applied to us, except in a general vague way. I believe that we and the Brothers are at a turning point in our and their understanding and implementation of association.

Let's define association. It is a bonding together for the common purpose of conducting Christian Schools. I think we can all more or less identify with that. We are doing that. Now this bonding together, this association allows for a great many degrees, a large spectrum. At one end we have the Brothers who are associated by vow. At the other end we have people who work in the same building and are relating to the same students, and that's about it. That is an extreme, but possible and real. Between these two extremes there is room for a great many degrees of association. My point is not to try to identify where we are on this spectrum. That is not yet possible. My point is to suggest that we are being

called to move on the spectrum to greater association for the common purpose.

Association for Lasallian Schools

We are being called to greater association in a Lasallian School. What is a Lasallian School? Or what makes a school Lasallian? From the very beginning, right to the present time a Lasallian School was recognized as different. What made it different was the presence of the Brothers. The terms Lasallian and Brothers were interchangeable. We spoke ordinarily of a Brothers' school. Graduates identified themselves as Brothers' boys, and now we can speak of Brothers' girls. These schools had profound influence on their students, and on other staff members. Whether there were many Brothers or only a few, the school was distinctive. What made these men Lasallian? It is very important for us to be clear on this, if we are ourselves to be identified as Lasallian by associating ourselves with the Brothers. It will be a superficial, unconscious association at best if we become Lasallian by some process of osmosis, or if we are Lasallian because we fall within the aura of the Brothers.

The Brothers and spirituality

The Brothers themselves are not Lasallian simply by virtue of membership in the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. Being Lasallian, it seems to me, is both a personal and communal enterprise, and it is available to us through the Brothers. De La Salle is their founder and father. They are his sons and heirs. De la Salle's legacy is primarily theirs, and can be ours through association and by their willingness to share it with us. De La Salle's legacy is essentially a spiritual one. It is discovered in his own life story, in his writings, in the 300 year old story of his Institute and in the lives of his Brothers present with us today.

It is the spirituality of De La Salle which makes the Brothers Lasallian, and their schools Lasallian, and it will only be by sharing that spirituality with us that the Brothers can hope to make us Lasallian. It will only be by their sharing that spirituality with us that we can hope to become Lasallian.

Please be aware that these are my views. I try to indicate that by repeatedly saying "it seems to me" or "I think". For some, and even for some Brothers, my emphasis on buying into the spirituality as a requirement for being Lasallian, may be a bit strong. I should make it very clear that I am not talking about, I don't think it is intended, nor do I think it is desirable that we all become "mini-brothers", or that we create a third order. I am talking about buying into a spirituality which is particularly suited to us as educators, and it is only available to us through the Brothers. With those cautions, let me proceed.

De La Salle, like all of us, did not sit down and write his life story or the life story of the Brothers, and then set about living it. His story, like ours, is written in the living of it. The story unfolds as we go along, not always as we or he would

have it. It is important for us to know his story and how he got into the work of the Christian Schools, but I cannot trace that here. He did in fact get into the work of establishing the Christian Schools. He quickly realized that they could not be maintained, could not prosper, unless they were staffed by trained and dedicated men who would give their entire lives to the schools. He also quickly realized that he himself had to train these men and that their dedication could not be sustained unless it were provided with interior and exterior supports and that the dedication must be based upon religious principles. He eventually, very gradually, painstakingly, brilliantly developed a spirituality for laymen who were exclusively, specifically committed to the ministry of education.

The spirituality of the educator

This is the great good news for us, you and me, lay people committed to education: the spirituality we need to sustain us in our ministry already exists. It is a living,, vibrant spirituality which has evolved from de La Salle's original teaching through 300 years of history. It is this spirituality, I think, which makes the Brothers unique. You and I, and the Brothers' students would, in general, be at a loss for words to explain why it is we are drawn to and devoted to the Brothers as we are.. It is this spirituality of De La Salle, I think, which they are trained to early in their lives and which they live out daily that draws us. It is this spirituality which, when all the external and superficial distinctions are removed that makes them Lasallian. It is not so esoteric, so otherworldly as to be beyond our reach. This spirituality is, as La Salle intended it, very practical, very functional, suited primarily to the Brothers, but able to be adopted and adapted by us. The sticking point is that we need to be educated and trained in this spirituality, and only the Brothers can do it. It is my own conviction that it is this spirituality which is the most characteristic element of anything Lasallian –whether it be Brothers, schools, students, teachers, people.

I know things are not this simple, and I know I am not sufficiently learned in these matters, and I have not done the research necessary to validate this statement, but, if I were to identify the linchpin which holds de La Salle's spirituality together, it would be what I consider his most brilliant insight, fully realized only late in his life, namely, that the Institute, the Christian Schools, were of divine origin. They were not the work of De La Salle, nor of the Brothers, nor of the Church, nor of us. They are God's work. And his work like his will will be done, regardless.

We are but his ministers, the administrators of his mercies. This rather awesome insight holds the spirituality together and informs each of the elements.

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