

The Lasallian Heritage Series

Ministry & Vocation in a Lasallian School

You must, then, look upon your work as one of the most important and most necessary services in the Church, one which has been entrusted to you by pastors, by fathers and mothers.

- Seventh Meditation for the Time of Retreat 199.1

The Mission is Shared in "Response to Needs"

The historical circumstances in which the Lasallian mission of Christian education originated meant that the members of the young Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools were recognized in 1725 by a Bull of Approbation of the Catholic Church as members of a lay religious congregation with an approved *Rule* of life. The very mission of the Institute has remained constant throughout its 325 year existence - providing a human and Christian education to youth.

What has changed is the emphasis of the lay character of the Institute. What was pioneered and preserved for a long time entirely by generations of Brothers, has now been enlarged and enriched by the gifts brought by others who have already become associated with this mission and wish to share it. But these gifts are not simply at the level of talents but, above all, at the level of identity and vocation. An unsuspected source of enrichment for the Lasallian mission can come from this mutual complementarity.

This transformation has not taken place in a vacuum nor in response to any theory; it has come from life. Ideas have certainly come from the Institute's reflection on its own heritage and from the new emphases which have marked the Catholic Church's profound attempt at renewal following the Second Vatican Council of 1962-1965. This movement of the Church and the Institute has continued through Church Synods and four Institute General Chapters (plenary sessions where the Brothers of the Institute gather in Rome at the Brothers' Generalate every 7 years) so that the new needs of the poor in their search for a good education, have become more apparent and more challenging. It is the wish to respond as far as possible to traditional needs in education as well as to seek solutions to those of a changing world society, which brings Brothers and their lay colleagues together in their common Lasallian mission.

If it is true that "ever since the time of their foundation, the Brothers have contributed to the promotion of the Christian laity, especially among those educators who want their professional work to be a form of Gospel Ministry," (the Brothers' *Rule*, 17) it was especially in the 30 years since the General Chapter of 1966-67 that the In-

stitute of the Brothers of the Christian schools advanced significantly in its understanding of the role and place of lay collaborators within the Lasallian educational communities. The *Declaration* of 1967 had said:

"The school will be molded into community only through a staff rich in the diversity and the unity of its members. For this reason the Brothers work closely with lay teachers ... Lay teachers should be completely involved with the whole life of the school: with catechesis, apostolic organization, extra-curricular activities, and administrative positions." (D 46.3)

Some nine years later, the General Chapter of 1976 introduced the idea of "different degrees of belonging" when it spoke of mission in the following way:

"The Brothers share Lasallian spirituality and the animation of their works with all the members of the educational community. They take care of their ongoing formation and are careful to make them know the different degrees of belonging to what is being called 'the Lasallian Family.'" (C 403, p. 77)

The General Chapter of 1986 approved the new *Rule* which introduced the expression *shared mission* and explicitly stated that "the Brothers gladly associate lay persons with them in their educational mission. They provide, for those who so desire, the means to learn about the Founder and to live according to his spirit." (*Rule*, 17). Along with other very concrete orientations from this *Rule*, this Chapter gave a strong impetus to *shared mission* and to the closer integration of lay persons into what is more accurately described as the Lasallian Mission.

In the years which have followed, Brother John Johnston as Superior General, frequently refers to the important role of the laity in the Lasallian mission in the traditional New Year pastoral letters which he addresses to the Brothers. Thus on 1 January 1988, he states:

"Lay people take their place as 'full partners' and we Brothers gladly associate them with us in our mission. We accept that from now on our schools will not be 'Brothers' schools,' animated by the Brothers' community with secondary collaboration of lay teachers, parents, students. They will be instead 'Lasallian schools,' animated by Lasallian educative communities of faith within which the apostolic activity of the Brothers' community takes place." (*Rule*, 17)

In 1989, the General Council of the Institute, in response to the demand of the 1986 General Chapter published the *Letter to the Lasallian Family*, which gave a new stimulus and attempted to offer clear and concrete directions concerning *Shared Mission* and the *Lasallian Family*.

The General Chapter of 1993, by inviting some 20 lay consultants to participate in the Chapter's discussion on Mission and by deciding to make shared mission one of the priorities for the next seven years, showed how essential the development of shared mission was for the continuation of the Institute's traditional mission of human and Christian education. Some of the leading ideas on this important topic as they reported in the official document of the Chapter, Circular 435, indicate new insights from the Chapter. Thus, Shared Mission is:

- a sign of the times;
- a grace;
- guided by the Spirit;
- a call of the Spirit;
- a new chapter in the history of the Institute;
- an "irresistible and irreversible (step) in our history.

The Chapter saw the Institute as being at a new moment of its history:

"In this new perspective we see our shared mission as a sign of the times. Far from being a regrettable situation, it constitutes an integral part of our vocation as lay religious persons. The Spirit invites us to a deeper and richer understanding of who we are and what we are called to do." (C 435 3.61)

Such an understanding of this new reality demands a change of mentality quite as much among lay people as among the Brothers so that *shared mission* can be accepted as a gift of God which commits all engaged in it to develop it for the good of the common mission, the Christian education of the poor.

For the Brothers, this change of mentality implies that they will no longer consider themselves as the only trustees or proprietors of the Lasallian charism in education. It is their duty to believe in the vocation of lay people, to support it and to encourage it. What is even more important is that the Brothers draw the practical consequences at the personal and community level of the specific responsibility which they carry in the *shared mission* as "the heart, the memory, the guarantors of the Lasallian charism." (C 435, p. 17)

For the lay people, the change in mentality allows them to consider the Lasal-

lian task in which they work as something which is proper to them and not something for which the Brothers alone are responsible. It means that they should completely accept their place and their responsibilities in the Lasallian educational plan and to feel that they are co-responsible in the common mission.

For both groups, this change of mentality means accepting differences, respecting them and working at the common mission together in a complementary way, according to their respective and specific vocations.

"God is calling each one according to his or her own vocation, to accomplish together the mission confided to Saint John Baptist de La Salle and to the Institute he founded." (C 435, p. 13)

It can be seen, therefore, that this General Chapter opened up vast horizons with regard to the theme of shared mission. This is expressed succinctly in the following sentence:

"The modest sub-title - A Shared Mission - in article 17 of the *Rule* is now seen as the bold title of a new chapter in the history of the Institute." (C 435, p. 8)

Shared Mission: Diversity & Complementarity

One of the most important recurring questions which has touched the Brothers in a special way is that of the identity of the Brother in the Shared Mission. The Brother can find himself asking what is the particularity of his vocation as a person, consecrated by the vows of religion, who now finds himself in a minority position as regards the number of persons sharing in the ministry of Christian education through the Lasallian Mission. At the same time, many Lasallian educators, while anxious to share as deeply as possible in the spirituality which has underpinned the Lasallian mission in education since its beginning, do not see their role in any way as simply a diluted version of the Brother's vocation. Others, because of their personal religious beliefs and affiliations, may find themselves uncomfortable with the description of their educational work in terms of Christian theology and may well feel that there is a solid anthropological basis for what they choose to do.

The Role of the Brother in the Mission

In attempting to situate himself in this new context, the Brother has to avoid the temptation to seek out differences between himself and his lay colleagues by reserving certain educational functions, whether administrative or pastoral, to himself. Brother John Johnston has been careful to draw attention to this point in his Pastoral Letters:

"We Brothers have to acknowledge that there is no educational service that is reserved to us. It is clear, therefore, that the nature of our identity and specific mission in the Church is not to be found in the particular services that we render." (1 January 1991, p. 20)

The Brothers' *Rule* of 1987 takes up the fundamental insight of the *Declaration* of 1967 (Nos. 12 and 13) in setting out the fundamental three elements, the constitutive elements, of the Brothers' vocation as

"Consecration to God as lay religious, (the) apostolic ministry of education, especially of the poor, and community life." (*Rule* 10)

First of all, these constitutive elements can be distinguished separately but are inextricably linked for the life to be lived authentically. As a person consecrated to God by vows, the Brother tries to live out his consecration. But this is not something hidden, something personal between himself and God: the Brother consecrates himself by public profession of vows, to be lived out in a community devoted to the apostolic ministry of education. The Brothers' *Rule* is challenging:

"As religious vowed to the ministry Christian education, the first apostolate of the Brothers consists in the witness of their consecrated life." (*Rule* 24)

Religious consecration, with its particular characteristics expressed in vows, constitutes the Brother as a sign, a reminder to his colleagues in shared missions of something in which all Christians share. Brother John Johnston, in allusion to ideas brought out in the Synod on Consecrated life, refers to it in the following way in his *Pastoral Letter* of 1 January 1995:

“Its identity (i.e. that of consecrated life) lies in the capacity to be a clear and visible SIGN of the radical choice of Christ which is innate in the vocation in all Christians.” (p. 47)

The consecrated layman, the community man, and the minister, are three aspects of the one same identity of the Brother. Each aspect assumes the others and is manifested in them. That is why we can say that the specific ministry of the Brother in the Church - his identity within the Church - is his personal consecration, lived in community for, and through, Christian education. From the origins of the Institute in the late 17th century, John Baptist de La Salle saw that communities of laymen were necessary if there was to be any continuity in the Christian schools which he founded.

Lastly, the challenges of the shared mission which requires the Brothers themselves to be “the heart, the memory, the guarantors of the Lasallian charism,” must not remain simply at the level of imagery. In the same way, the Brother has to be watchful in regard to the overall fidelity of the Lasallian body to this small covenant which is none other than the Lasallian charism, a precious gift of the Spirit to the Church. In facing the challenges of being the heart, the inner heart as it were of the international body, the Brothers everywhere are called to draw from their heritage those aspects of the common memory which are more immediately accessible to them through their initial formation and education as members of the Institute. Such aspects may not be reduced simply to history and documentation but should include rather the living manifestation of those Lasallian characteristics of devotedness to the mission of Christian education, the profound sense of gratuity as free giving without hope of reward and such fundamental Lasallian practices as the recalling of the Presence of God, the Daily Reflection and frequent prayer with the students, where the Brother is called to

speak in faith with his students. He does this in faith because of his concern, his zeal, that all students come to deepen their knowledge and understanding of the salvation brought through Jesus Christ. Lastly, there is the importance to the religious community as such to be a true sign of the Gospel life which it professes. To the extent that this is authentic, it can be the nucleus of the educational community and thus, the creator of other communities of various kinds around itself.

“We witness by our community life and the vow of stability, our availability to take on urgent tasks when others are unable or unwilling to do so, and our unselfish dedication to the advancement of the laity. The Brothers’ vow of association for the educational service of the poor is an indispensable sign for everyone of fidelity to a mission received from God.” (C 345, p. 44)

Objectively speaking, from the viewpoint of dedication to Roman Catholic Christian education, there are certainly different levels of commitment among the many participants who contribute to the Lasallian mission. Perhaps beginning from life, the Lasallian mission is to stand before an extremely rich panorama of real life situations where the mystery of life, of individual existence and the overriding importance of the freedom of the individual meet. If the following points show a certain gradation towards complete acceptance of Catholic beliefs and practices, this is intended to be simply descriptive and not normative in all circumstances. Thus, the Lasallian mission in education is shared by:

- those, who while not sharing the same religious beliefs or practices as Catholics, wish to devote themselves personally and professionally to the education of their pupils and are prepared in complete respect, to support the traditional religious practice of the Lasallian school;
- those who for personal reasons do not consider themselves as fully-practicing

Christians but wish to support the principles of the educational work in which they freely engage;

- those who see their involvement and commitment to the Lasallian mission as linked to their understanding of their own Christian beliefs and practices and bring a certain personal vocation and commitment to what they see as the *ministry of teaching*.

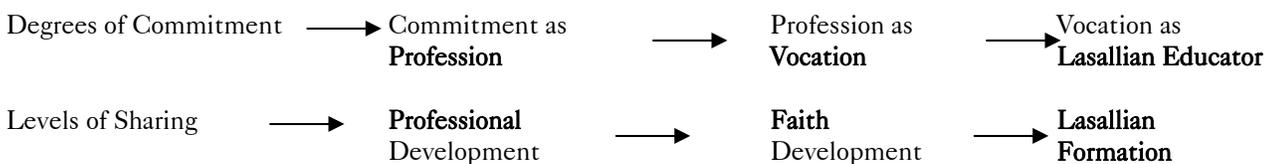
This gradation is viewed from a Christian perspective. But the *Lasallian Heritage* (cf. 1.2 & 1.3) has already shown us that for the second half of its history, the Lasallian mission in education has grown and developed in many countries precisely because of the openness, good will and dedication of many Lasallian colleagues of other faiths. The Lasallian school or work has been a presence, a witness to gratuity and the willingness to share the living of the Gospel with others.

Brother Robert Schieler, in *Lasallian 32-16-D-84*, has approached the question of *fostering the shared mission* through what he calls the stages of “degrees of commitment” and “levels of sharing” according to a sequence which can be presented diagrammatically on below.

It is important to recognize that each degree of commitment and sharing is valuable in itself. Those persons who wish to be more than professionally committed may come to develop a personal sense of vocation as Lasallian educators through their willingness to take part in sessions of Lasallian formation like the Buttimer Institute for Lasallian Studies or the Lasallian Leadership Institute.

Many such Lasallian educators seem to have found that their lives as married persons with family responsibilities can find a particular enrichment and focus through programs of Lasallian formation.

Brother Robert Schieler’s Diagram of Commitment and Sharing:



Baptized Members of the Church are Responsible for the Church's Mission

Christians have always accepted that they should help in their own way to make Christ and his message known. The *Acts of the Apostles* tells the story of the first generation of Christians who took it as their duty to make known to others the Good News (Gospel) which they had received through the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. Saint Paul, in the first letter to the Corinthians (9.16), expresses his conviction about this duty as “not that I do boast of preaching the Gospel, since it is a duty which has been laid on me; I should be punished if I did not preach it.”

Every Christian is not necessarily called to be a full-time preacher of the Gospel but is rather someone who “proclaims the Gospel” by allowing his or her life and actions to be shaped according to the principles of the Gospel. This attitude is strongly confirmed in the Apostolic Exhortation of Pope John Paul II, *The Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful*, of December 1988, in the following citations:

“The voice of the Lord clearly resounds in the depths of each of Christ’s followers, who through faith and the sacraments of Christian initiation is made like to Jesus Christ, is incorporated as a living member in the Church and has an active part in her mission of salvation.” (3)

“The lay faithful, precisely because they are members of the Church, have the vocation and mission of proclaiming the Gospel; they are prepared for this work by the sacraments of Christian initiation and by the gifts of the Holy Spirit.” (33)

When there is greater awareness of the mystery of the Church as *communion*, as *people of God*, everything in the Church is directed towards ministry, all the members are equal in the dignity conferred on them by baptism and all are co-responsible in the one mission of Jesus Christ. When this is understood, lay persons are equal with all others in the Church, that is, they are not simply people to be evangelized but are rather foremost in sharing the gospel themselves. This is a transition from a “clerical” Church to a new understanding of

Church in which lay people find their particular place and their specific role. This is what is meant by the advancement of the laity. By reason of their Christian vocation, lay people are called to be in Gospel images, *light, salt, and leaven* in the very heart of family and social life, so that their role and their mission are irreplaceable. It is because of their very lay character in the world that they have to arrange earthly matters according to God’s saving plan. Such an advancement of the laity is a genuine sign of the times with great advantages for the Church’s overall mission.

This is the movement followed by the Institute in its development from “tolerating” the presence of lay teachers in the emergency situations of World War II to considering and esteeming them as *partners* in a common mission in the General Chapter of 1993. Pope John Paul II, referring to the “objectives of the third millennium” makes reference to the role of lay Christians in the task of a new hearing of the Gospel:

“... the lay faithful ought to regard themselves as an active and responsible part of this venture of proclaiming the gospel to the whole creation, called as they are to proclaim and to live the Gospel in service to the person and to society while respecting the totality of values and needs of both.” (*The Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful*, 64)

“The Brothers who ‘have contributed to the promotion of the Christian laity, especially among those educators who want their professional work to be a form of Gospel ministry’ (the *Rule* 17), continue their work in this direction with renewed vigor and with new perspectives.”

If it is true that all Christians are responsible for the mission of the Church, each person is so in terms of his or her own vocation and personal identity. This, of course, is not new in the Church. The First Letter of Saint Peter (4.10) reminds its readers that “Each one of you has received a special grace, so like good stewards responsible for all these different graces of God, put yourself at the service of others.” The complementarity of gifts which can enrich the educational community and thus be a source of richness for the mission is well described in the citation which follows:

“Education in the faith is a part of the finality of a Catholic school. The more fully the educational community represents the richness of the ecclesial (Church) community, the more capable it will be of fulfilling this mission. When priests, men and women Religious, and lay people are all present together in a school, they will present students with a living image of this richness, which can lead to a better understanding of the reality of the Church.” (*Lay Catholics in Schools: Witnesses to Faith* [No. 43, 1982])

All educators who work in Lasallian Schools and foundations, therefore, are invited to share the common principles and particular emphases which are essential to the Lasallian heritage. To the extent that these educators feel that they can bring their own particular gifts to Lasallian education, they can legitimately feel themselves *sharers* in the overall *educational mission* carried out by their particular institution. In a very important sense, they should see themselves as enlarging and enriching the Lasallian heritage’s traditional sense of *responding to needs* by bringing and sharing their own particular gifts with their students.

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