

**WOMEN AND LASALLIAN ASSOCIATION**  
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Some affirm that the 21<sup>st</sup> century in which we are living will be the century for women. It certainly is a reality that women today are occupying the place that they ought to: that of perfect equality with men, the two of them made in God's image. We can see a sign of this in Asia where "Mrs." Aung San Suu Kyi is a symbol of courage and peaceful resistance for Myanmar and for the world. We have another sign in Latin America where two of the most important countries are governed by women – Brazil and Argentina – and even my small country of Costa Rica where Laura Chinchilla, a former student from Colegio La Salle in San José, is our president. We cannot forget the enormous power that Europe has today in the person of Angela Merkel, the prime minister of Germany. And in the United States women religious have great leadership, enjoy great esteem and they render extraordinary service to society, especially in favor of those who are most vulnerable.

This situation, thanks be to God, is not unlike that of the Lasallian world. This is not only due to the great number of female students we have today but also for the educational work that many women carry out. According to the most recent statistics, there are 46,523 female teachers which constitute 5,000 more than the male teachers in our educational institutions (cf. Institute Statistics for December 2011). Their presence and their historical role no doubt will help in building a society that is more human and fraternal, to revise our mental outlook, to place ourselves in history in a different way, to organize social, political, financial, and religious life in a way that is more intuitive and cordial. Circular 461, in looking at this new reality, tells us: *Once again the founding story continues to be lived out anew...continues to move from crisis to crossroads; from discouragement to hope* (Circular 461: 1.14).

In all religions, women have played a very important role. In the biblical tradition of the Judeo-Christian religion, God does not appear under masculine language alone, but also the feminine reveals God's very being. God is compared to a mother who consoles her children (Isaiah 66: 14) and at the end of history, as a loving mother who will wipe away the tears of her children (Apocalypse 21: 4). God's maternal love is so tremendous that even if a mother, in a hypothetical case, could forget her child, God will never forget you (Isaiah 49: 14 - 15).

Furthermore, Hosea and Jeremiah express in a moving way the maternal behavior of God: *When Israel was a child, I loved him, out of Egypt I called my son...Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, who took him in my arms. I drew them with human cords, with bands of love; I fostered them like those who raise an infant to their cheeks; I bent down to feed them...My heart is overwhelmed, my pity is stirred* (Hosea 11: 1 - 8); *Is Ephraim not my favored son, the child in whom I delight? Even though I threaten him, I must still remember him! My heart stirs for him, I must show him compassion!* (Jeremiah 31: 20). Therefore I can say along with Saint Clement of Alexandria, who was born around the year 150: *Contemplate the mysteries of love and you will see "the bosom of the Father"...God is love* (1 John 4: 8) *and for that reason he has let himself be seen by us. In his indescribable being, he is Father; in his compassion towards us, he is Mother. It is in loving that the Father presents himself to us as also feminine.*

You will have a time to reflect about the women in the life of our Founder, I will limit myself to highlight the decisive role two women played in the founding of the Institute and, therefore, in the Lasallian mission. The first is Madame Maillefer, according to Blain, or Madame L'Eveque, according to Bernard. Both state that it was one of them along with Mr. Nyel who motivated De La Salle towards schools for children and the Founder was believed to have said: *I had never thought about this at all, and not because it had not been proposed to me...*

The second woman is Sister Louise Hours who providentially intervened at a critical time for the Institute. She encouraged the Founder to take up the leadership of the nascent society once again. *That is not God's will. You should not abandon the family of which He has made you the Father. Your patrimony is your work; you must persevere in it until the end, uniting the roles of Magdalene and Mary.*

So one woman was at the very beginning of association for mission, which you carry on today, and another woman prevented the Founder, at a time of crisis and difficulty, from abandoning the work that he had

undertaken. If today we live as associated, it is thanks to these two women, without forgetting about Mr. Nyel, whose 325<sup>th</sup> anniversary we recall this year.

## **1. Associated for the Educational Service of the Poor**

Up until a few years ago when we talked about association for the educational service of the poor, we used to think only of our Brothers in the community and in the District. Later on, we extended our thinking to include our Brothers in the Region and in the Institute. But today, we are completely convinced that association also includes all those who share our mission and who are associated with us. Women occupy a very important place in all of this. As Circular 461 says: *We are moving from crises to crossroads*. And you are one of these very important roads.

Many times you hear it said that it is important *not to miss the train*, the train of history and of the times in which we live. For us, this means being open to a new form of Institute in which the Lasallian Charism is not patrimony reserved for the Brothers, but one that is shared with all those with whom we carry out our mission elbow to elbow, and especially with those who in a special way want to live associated with us, making the Lasallian charism and spirituality their own.

Today we can look at the Institute in two ways. We can look at it by yearning for a past that no longer exists and which paralyzes us or we can look at it in a hopeful way as we build for the future a new reality in which we broaden our association for the educational service of the poor with all those who make the Lasallian charism their own. This really is about a true rebirth or refoundation in which you have a leading role.

Once again I am reminded of something I have said on many occasions. I believe that we can apply to Association what St-Exupéry said about friendship: *It's not so much about looking at one another, but looking together in the same direction*. And this direction can be none other than the educational service of the poor who are young and, starting from them, all young people. It is starting from that finality that structures need to be built that will ensure our association and give it consistency. The active participation of women in these new structures is very important.

Forty years ago the Declaration invited us to give the laity the place that is theirs in the Lasallian school. *For this reason the Brothers are happy to collaborate with lay teachers, who bring to the teaching community a contribution that comes from their knowledge of the world, their experience in family life, civic affairs and labor organizations. The Brothers act in such a way as to guarantee that the lay teachers are involved in the whole life of the school: with the catechesis, apostolic movements, extra-curricular activities, as well as in administration and matters of policy (46.3)*. We know today that this is a fact in many Districts.

This undercurrent should be present in our association with lay persons, establishing a new type of communion and cooperation with them. As a Vatican document says: *Whereas at times in the recent past, collaboration came about as a means of supplementing the decline of consecrated persons necessary to carry out activities, now it is growing out of the need to share responsibility not only in the carrying out of the Institute's works but especially in the hope of sharing specific aspects and moments of the spirituality and mission of the Institute..* Recalling the help and spiritual nourishment that lay people bring to us, it concludes: *Communion and mutuality in the Church are never one way streets (Starting Afresh from Christ, 31)*. We mutually enrich one another.

## **2. Characteristics of Lasallian Association**

From the perspective of the idea of association, it was the General Chapter of 2000 that has given the greatest impetus to the concept of the Lasallian shared mission. The Chapter highlighted the five characteristics on which a formation process leading towards association should be based. I would like to make a brief comment on each of them:

- *A vocation inspired by the charism of Saint John Baptist de La Salle and his values*. This has to do with becoming aware of who we are as expressed by the Founder in his *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*, cooperators with and ambassadors of God, guardian angels for our students...It's about living out the

wonderful teaching profession as a call from God in order to build up his Kingdom through Christian education inspired by Lasallian values.

- *A life of faith which discovers God in everyday life understood in the light of Scripture and, for persons of other religions, in the light of their own sacred texts.* This idea deals with discovering God's saving plan in events and persons, especially the poor, in the light of the Word of God, just as the Founder was always attentive to and allowed himself to be moved by reality in light of faith. This experience can be lived from each one's respective creed, other Lasallians committed along with us to building a more human world starting from education. That is why Circular 461 states: *However we readily recognize the many sincere women and men of other faith families who center their professional and times personal lives, on the founding Lasallian story* (1.18).
- *A community experience of some form or other suited to the identity of its members.* The Lasallian adventure is not a solitary one. One essential characteristic is the community aspect, working in a group on a common project. This does not mean that the Brother's religious community is to be "copied," but it has to do with a reference community that accompanies, helps to grow and is unabatedly committed to other reference communities on the family, social or political level. All Lasallians are called to feel that they are brothers or sisters without borders, always willing to lend a hand and to overcome any differences.
- *A mission of some duration which associates persons with the educational service of the poor.* The purpose of our association is the educational service of the poor and, based on them, of young people in general. No matter the place where we carry out our mission, we should have a serious concern and a clear preference for those who need us the most. This finality should make us creative and lead us to sensitize young people who are better off to the shortages of others, not just on the statistical level but on the level of concrete experience that will help them to know reality better. Association is not a one-day flower. It assumes, as the Chapter says, a certain duration which is not specified and which could vary, I believe, according to various cases.
- *An openness of mind which makes it possible to see beyond the individual and his or her immediate environment.* The associate feels part of an international Institute and does not identify solely with the local ministry in which he or she works. Associate have a sense of District, Region, Institute. They are open to new possibilities and to new adventures.

The Chapter did not want to give the final word in order to allow for the freedom for making new quests and achievements. If as the Brothers' Rule says that the mission is always to be discovered, we can also say that association is built up on a daily basis. And if freedom for making new quests and achievements is to be observed, freedom in one's personal decision to become associated is also fundamental. Association can never be forced nor can it be used like a trampoline to gain posts of prestige.

### **3. Lasallian Family and Association**

An International Assembly entitled "Associated for the Lasallian Educational Mission" was held in Rome in 2006. The 2000 General Chapter of the Brothers had decided to hold this Assembly. There were 140 Lasallian participants, among whom were the Superior and General Council of the Brothers as well as the leaders of the other Lasallian Institutes of consecrated life. But two-thirds of the participants were lay persons (women 33, men 107). All participants had the same rights of voice and vote. All participated in the Assembly as representatives of the Lasallian charism and mission, but from different states of life. The majority were elected as representatives in assemblies which, beginning one year before had been held in the various Lasallian Regions.

As you know, this past May we had the 2<sup>nd</sup> International Assembly on Association for the Lasallian Mission, similar to the previous one, and this time there were 162 participants. The theme of the Assembly was: One Family, One Mission: Lasallians Associated for the Educational Service of the Poor. The theme was looked at from three angles: Lasallian Education, Evangelization and Community. The number of women present for this Assembly increased considerably, as you can see by the following statistics: Women: 47. Men: 62, not counting the Brothers.

The second Assembly proposed a series of fundamental guidelines to the entire Lasallian Family and priority areas on the mission on which urgent action is needed. Throughout all of these, it is easy to sense the strong lines that are marks of the charism, and which should propel the new stage of Lasallian history. Among these strong lines the following three stand out in a special way:

- **The community dimension:** The Assembly was aware of the fact that within it our charismatic strength to serve the mission resided, and this is also the condition that we ought to fulfill if we want to be a sign for the world. Therefore, the Assembly asked that different forms be developed, creating relational community spaces within educational works, accompanying and making known experiences of new communities, promoting adult communities as a reference point for young people, promoting Lasallian youth groups that live out the values of faith, fraternity, and service.
- **Association for mission,** in which the Lasallian charism has been made manifest and has been expressed since our origins. The Assembly, which is itself a sign of association, felt itself responsible, along with the entire Lasallian Family, to give continuity to the charism of De La Salle within the Church. Association is part of the community dimension, but it goes beyond the limits of space and time of a local community. Each associate, even if he or she belongs to a local community, adapts his or her sense of belonging in order to integrate it in the way that they belong to the great community of Lasallian associates who serve the educational mission where they are and where they are needed. The Assembly asked that experiences in association be encouraged, as well as processes and life journeys that lead to association, and it proposed new structures that will represent all members of the Lasallian Family.
- **The principal beneficiaries of the mission,** those for whom we should feel special predilection among children and young people, are the poor. The first Assembly put it this way for the entire Lasallian Family: "The vitality of our mission depends on how we respond today, in association, to the needs of the poor. We value the efforts that we Lasallians are making to liberate the poor from their different forms of poverty, and we ask that service of the poor and the promotion of justice be considered the heart of and the cause for strengthening the Lasallian mission in the world." The Assembly was very sensitive to children and young people who are at risk, those who are in extreme situations and in new situations of exclusion and marginalization. We can no longer content ourselves with repeating traditional structures. We need to be very creative to produce integration and hope where there is only marginalization. The 2013 Assembly also emphasized responding especially to the needs of the most vulnerable.

## Conclusion

It seems to me that we should see association as a moment of grace and renewal. I know that within the Institute some Brothers have some doubts about this and they fear that our vocation is being diluted. Personally I do not agree with this position. We know that the charism came out of a movement and we made it an institution. It is an inevitable and necessary process. But once in a while it is necessary to rekindle the fire by which we came into existence and to revive the mystical moment of our origins.

I would like to conclude with two questions:

1. Aren't we experiencing a time of new charismatic freshness with new blood and a new reading being provided today in a special way by Lasallian women?
2. What role do Lasallian women play both in terms of numbers and active participation in the new structures of association that we have created? Such structures include: The International Assembly for the Lasallian Educational Mission; the Lasallian District Educational Mission Assembly; the Regional Lasallian Educational Mission Assembly; the District Lasallian Educational Mission Council? What is their participation in formation programs on the District, Regional and International level?