

The Vows of the Brothers in the History of the Institute

(abridged)

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Vows and commitment

It is evident, then, that **the vow commitment cannot be understood apart from the other important considerations**. First of all, it is not the vow structure which constitutes the Brother or even defines his commitment. *This was evident in de La Salle's case*. It was not a vow structure which indicated the steps of his progressive commitment to the teachers and as he strove with them to carry out God's plan to serve "poor and abandoned" youth. His commitment involved his whole life, which he understood as a response to God's call to cooperate in carrying out his plan in favor of young men "far from salvation".

This life commitment of the Founder was both existential and transcendent; his commitment to God took shape and was strengthened by his everyday fidelity to the Brothers and to youth. The important point is that he made the decisive and radical option for the apostolate of the Institute before the vow of 1686 and *a fortiori* before those of 1691 and 1694. What is more, the step taken in 1691 with Gabriel Drolin and Nicolas Vuyart can be explained only by their previous life commitment. In other words, De La Salle and his two companions do not commit themselves by vows *in order to* commit themselves existentially; they commit themselves by vows *because* they are already existentially committed. At a time of crisis, they reaffirm the resolve which for years had already guided their actions and their life. The same thing may be said with regard to the vows taken in 1694 by twelve brothers. These vows were intended to consecrate rather than constitute the association envisioned from the very beginning and clearly projected in 1691. For De La Salle, the act of 1694 ratified that of 1691 as well as the whole life commitment which was expressed and renewed at that time.

It is now possible to understand the part played by the vow structure in the larger context of De La Salle's existential commitment. The vows of 1691 and 1694 ratified and expressed his life commitment. They situated it in the totality of a life whose meaning had become clear in successive stages; they affirmed the unity of his personal existence summed up at an important moment of time. The formula reveals the historical problems and the difficulties as they were encountered and foreseen. Besides, by affirming and celebrating in some way his life commitment, the acts of 1691 and 1694 reinforced and gave it a second start. It is worthwhile noting that the vow of 1691 was pronounced by

De La Salle at a time when his previous efforts seemed to be doomed to failure since the community was on the verge of abandoning its work.

The vow commitment was also a *personal* commitment that resulted in a freedom from the world by fixing one's sights on God. However, this is so only because a person takes a step that affirms and strengthens human solidarity. It was *with* men that De La Salle committed himself. It was *in order to* establish an association (1691) and to give it consistency (1694) that he committed himself by vow. It is specifically to serve human beings ("poor and abandoned children") that he simultaneously committed himself and joined others in order to found a community dedicated to the purpose which was its very reason for being. Here again, the vow commitment had its meaning and value in the light of a broader existential commitment which gave it direction and meaning.

Something happened much later that sheds light on just how serious the vow commitment of the Founder was. In the well known letter of 1714, the principal brothers in Paris commanded De La Salle, then in the Midi, to return to take up the government of the Institute. They expressly referred to the vow he took twenty years earlier. "*We command you in the name and on the part of the Body of the Society, to which you promised obedience, to look after the general government of our Society at all times*".

It is evident that the initiative of the brothers and their very language referred back to his vow commitment. It is also clear that De La Salle yielded at that time by fidelity to his vow. However, to understand this unusual exchange in a juridical and mechanical fashion would lessen its significance considerably.

Here again, this command and this obedience have to be seen in their existential context. For one thing De La Salle was at that time uncertain. He seemed no longer capable of discernment. The initiative of his followers gave him a clear, objective path to follow. He did not respond like a robot, but like a man who had discovered his way. Here again, fidelity to the "vow" is only the image of fidelity to himself, to his life, and to his life-work, obscured for a while by seeming contradictions. For another thing, it should be clearly understood what constituted this crisis which De La Salle faced during a period of great darkness: it involved the very meaning of his life. He believed that God had called him to found the Society of Brothers and everything seemed to indicate that he had failed, that he had been mistaken. It is his very relationship with God that had been struck a blow. The brothers, as a matter of fact, seemed to reject him; the Institute appeared to be breaking up into little cliques; ecclesiastical superiors had been appointed in contradiction to what had been decided shortly after the profession of those who took the vows in 1694. In such a situation, what did the brothers' letter mean? That the Society had a sense of itself, that its members believe this to such an extent that they came together on their own initiative, that they acted as the spokesmen for the "Body of the Society". As a result, everything became clear, and De La Salle could take up his work again.

Nevertheless, he certainly did not comply materially and mechanically to an order received. The brothers' letter, in its content as much as by the bold initiative it represented, brought him back to his whole life commitment. He responded by going beyond the letter's command in order to be even more faithful to this commitment. The brothers had asked him to resume the work of the general running of the Society. His response went beyond the demand for he returned only in order to bring about something that had always appeared to him to be of the utmost importance if the Society was to take definitive form, namely, to hand over the overall government of the Institute to a brother. Immediately upon his return, he shared the leadership with Brother

Barthélemy and he steered the Institute toward the General Chapter of 1717 which named his successor. In any case, this is a good example of how the Founder's commitment went far beyond obedience to a vow.

The fact that a life commitment can go beyond the vow commitment and, in fact, explains it appears also *in the case of the first brothers*. At least, that can be concluded from the biographies of the Founder when they refer to the young men who joined up with him at the beginning of 1682. It was a matter of conscious and resolute decision for these brothers to take up a new life which would put them in touch with an authentic spiritual master and make them available for an urgent and efficacious service to men. Several among them even gave up their initial orientation towards the priesthood. They did not enter into a structure, a well-defined state of life officially considered as accepted. But they committed themselves to a life that seemed at the time being growing at Rheims. Their life commitment came from a *liberty*, an interior movement allowing them to discern De La Salle's evangelical spirit, and from a desire to give themselves to the service of the poor. The commitment by vow came later. They would live their commitment progressively with the temporary vow of obedience only in 1686 and perpetual vows in 1691. The vow eventually expressed what they had first of all lived: the association to keep free schools, a life of obedience, and stability.

C. Structures in the Institute

Nor is the structure for committing oneself by vows sufficient to constitute or define the *community* or the *Society* that formed itself around De La Salle. The earliest text of De La Salle that we have reveals his conception of the Institute. It is the *Memoir on the Habit*, written no doubt at the end of 1689 or the beginning of 1690 to defend the brothers' public image and to claim internal autonomy for the community now become interdiocesan. Obviously the text insists on the rather unusual habit, opposed by the pastor of St. Sulpice, explaining its functional nature and its importance for the special identity of those men who were neither clerics nor seculars. But even more than a form of dress, the Founder was defending an idea that he considered very important, the internal autonomy of the community, which was contested by the pastor of St. Sulpice who wanted the brothers to wear the ecclesiastical habit. This defensive stance led him to take a strong stand for the role the habit would play in the birth of the Institute and the uniform understanding of its identity. "*Before this special habit...*" "*Since this habit...*," he builds several paragraphs on this contrast. But the text evokes the principal structures which defined the community at that time: members followed a rule, were not independent, held no property, lived a common life. There is no talk here of vows, although these were already present, no doubt largely because these vows were neither taken by everyone nor were they official. In any case, a structure based on a commitment by vows did not seem to be decisive for constituting the community nor for deciding who belonged to it.

It was in 1726 that Chapters XVII: *On the Vows* and XVIII: *On the Obligation of the Vows of the Brothers of the Christian Schools* were added to the Rule; the Rule of 1705 and of 1718 had nothing similar. These absences can be explained and certainly too much weight should not be given them since, as was noted above, the vows were introduced into the Institute as early as 1686 and 1694. Yet the legislation of the Founder did not give them a constitutive importance for the community.

Structures obviously existed in the community of De La Salle from the very beginning. The Founder and the brothers spent a great deal of time in their elaboration. The Rule was written much later in comparison with the usages of common life which were

established at once: the style of life, the exercises, and everything held in common. Structures of government were devised as well; the lay character of the Institute was defined and maintained; the unity of structure was affirmed and defended in the course of important disputes. The vows appeared as one of those structures but only as one of them, and not the most decisive one.

With regard to this structure, and in general those structures just spoken about, a comparison between the attitude of De La Salle and that of the brothers will help show its meaning. Now, the Founder's biographers show a certain slight difference, not to say divergence, between the mentality and preoccupations of the brothers and those of De La Salle. It seems that the brothers pressed more for the vows than the Founder did although, at the time of the first assembly of 1686, the initiative for taking vows appeared to come from De La Salle himself. But his role seems to have been especially one of taking care that things did not go too far: at the outset the brothers wanted *perpetual* vows of chastity and obedience and even, according to the second Maillefer biography, of poverty. De La Salle kept them from moving too swiftly. "(He) does not want to rush into anything; he tells them that for the present it is sufficient to bind themselves by the vow of obedience for one year only, and to save their good will for another time, meanwhile they will have the leisure to prove themselves after more experience." It took eight years before De La Salle consented, at the insistence of the brothers, to permit twelve of them to take perpetual vows of association, stability, and obedience. The brothers appear to have put great weight on commitment by vows in order to keep them faithful. De La Salle was more reserved; he believed that the commitment by vow would have meaning and effectiveness only to the extent that it were to express a life commitment come to maturity over a long period of time and, above all, lived out. He was justified by the facts for from the very beginning a number of brothers who took perpetual vows left the Institute.

This may also be seen in another matter that is related to the vows. In the biographies of the Founder another important difference, if not divergence, between the master and his disciples had to do with the *official approbation of the Society*. It would be an exaggeration to say that De La Salle was not concerned about it. He sent Gabriel Drolin to Rome, for example, and that indicates at least a certain orientation toward the recognition of the Society by the Holy See. Yet this motivation hardly appeared in his correspondence with Drolin. The brothers, on the other hand, were much more concerned about such juridical recognition. Several times the Founder cautioned them on this point, requesting them not to give priority or even exclusivity to this justifiable goal. The first real steps toward the recognition of the Institute by Rome were taken after the Founder's death.

The biographies as well as the whole history of De La Salle allow the following interpretation. The Founder's entire life was certainly motivated and given its dynamism by his fundamental goal: to establish, strengthen, and assure the continuity of the Society of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, which he saw to be vitally and urgently necessary for the salvation of a vast segment of youth, namely, poor and abandoned children. All his efforts went toward the achievement of this goal. However, rather than rely on extrinsic means for the solidity and existence of his Society, he wanted it to be self sufficient. In particular this meant, first and foremost,

a) that it be constituted of men who would volunteer freely and were aware of their life commitment as well as its urgency and necessity. The difference between the first group and the second in 1682 illustrates this. The first teachers were not entirely willing

recruits. They belonged rather to the category of hired helpers. The difference in 1682 was that level-headed, free men joined up.

b) The Founder was concerned, secondly, that these men would be spiritually committed and live according to the spirit which this implied, in particular with an awareness that they had answered a call from God to a human endeavor. He insisted that they see the urgent needs of abandoned youth and understand them in the light of an ongoing history of salvation; that they recognize in the loving teaching of neglected youth that a salvific event was being carried out for both the young and themselves; that this was transforming their existence and opening up access to their liberty as the children of God; that daily effort was needed to live this important message of salvation as disinterested, attentive, competent and courageous ministers of the kingdom of God in behalf of this neglected youth. All of this is particularly clear notably in the Meditations for the Time of Retreat.

c) In the third place, he wanted the Society to become both the object and the incentive of this life commitment for men freely associated and responsible for their common apostolate and for the shape that the Society would gradually assume. Of course, this Society could not exist without structures. However, De La Salle appeared more concerned about the authenticity and vitality of the structural process rather than the nature of the structures resulting from it. He held to the structures because they expressed and construed a kind of association understood as a manifestation and context for their mutual education here and now in the living reality of the Gospel. Thus it was important to the Founder at the outset that the elaboration of the structures should truly be the work of the brothers themselves; that the Rule be lived by them before it was codified. De La Salle considered it most important that all the brothers participate freely in organizing it. Furthermore, the organization was elaborated only in reference to the *raison d'être* of the Society. Thus it was out of its own strength that the Society was established and kept together and not primarily by exterior structures of juridical approval. The latter were not neglected, but De La Salle requested those brothers who were overly concerned about obtaining official approval to seek their personal and community assurance primarily in their lived commitment, viewed in its spiritual meaning and importance as well as in the way its structures evolved from within.

This is the broad reality which had its part to plan in structuring the commitment by vows; the reticence of De La Salle when faced with the urgings of the brothers reveals clearly his fundamental intention. On the one hand, he did not hasten the introduction of perpetual vows, even though he accepted and even encouraged this step when he thought it corresponded to and would strengthen the lived reality. On the other hand, the content of the commitment that he favored was defined by starting from the experience of the Society in view of better carrying out its apostolate: association to maintain the free schools, stability, obedience to superiors and to the body of the Society.

Here again, the difference, and perhaps the divergence, of perspective between the Founder and his disciples becomes particularly meaningful, especially when it is a question of the vow structure. When De La Salle, in 1686, spoke of vows, the brothers seemed to think immediately of the three traditional vows. No doubt this meant that they tended to seek their identity by referring to already existing states of life and categories.

In short, their desire for the three vows was in effect a search for an extrinsic identity. The refusal of the Founder, as well as the content given the vows of 1686 and 1694, arose from an entirely different point of reference: the act of commitment by vow should

express a life experience, proclaim this experience, and in proclaiming it strengthen and broaden its scope.

D. The secondary position of the vows.

One other remark should be added. The spiritual teaching of the Founder on commitment and on fidelity had very little reference to the vows that were taken. There is only one explicit text on this subject; it is found in the *Collection* of 1711 in the chapter entitled, “*What the Brothers of the Christian Schools Are Obligated to by the Vows.*” This text is rather juridical in style, and contrasts with the overall teaching of De La Salle. On the whole, the Founder describes the commitment and fidelity of the brothers in terms of person and of relations: “to be faithful to these young people who are confided to you, faithful to the task to help them lead a useful human life in society and open to a filial spirit...”; in terms of fidelity to the spirit; in terms of real solidarity with the men one has joined and with whom one is associated. Also, from another viewpoint, when De La Salle referred to the Gospels as important for his brothers, this had nothing to do with an abstract and stunted understanding of the three evangelical counsels. First of all, De La Salle referred constantly to the whole Gospel; secondly, he referred the brothers to the meaning and dynamism of the Good News of Salvation in terms of entry into the life of adopted sonship, universal brotherhood, growth in the Spirit; finally and especially, the Gospel is regarded and presented by him as an actual reality, an event of today which reaches into the heart of the brother who is an agent chosen by God to do his work and make the Gospel a living reality.

In this perspective, the theme of consecration is much more decisive than that of the vows. This can be seen in the very formula of the vows. However, De La Salle did not so much develop a theory of consecration for the brothers as help them to see in their daily lives a real experience. They were consecrated to poor and abandoned youth in order to contribute to their full liberation. He urged them to live this reality of their lives by “honoring their ministry”. He encouraged them to consider and to live this everyday reality as a history of salvation, begun at creation, accomplished in Christ and whose fulfilment was, at one and the same time, already taking place and still awaited. Finally, for De La Salle, religious commitment was neither something added to nor different from human commitment. The vow commitment contained nothing of a religious superstructure.

Formula of Vows 1691	Formula of Vows 1694
<p>Most Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, prostrate with profound respect before your infinite and adorable Majesty, <i>we consecrate ourselves</i> entirely to you <i>to procure by all our power and all our efforts the establishment of the Society of the Christian Schools</i> in the manner which will appear to us to be most agreeable to you and most advantageous for the said Society. And for this purpose, I, John Baptist de La Salle, priest, ... we, now and forever, until death or the completion of the establishment of the said Society, <i>vow association and union to procure and</i></p>	<p>Most Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, prostrate with the most profound respect before your infinite and adorable Majesty, <i>I consecrate myself</i> entirely to you <i>to procure your glory</i> as far as I am able and as you will require of me. And for this purpose, I, John Baptist de La Salle, priest, ... promise and <i>vow to unite myself and to live in Society</i> with... <i>to keep together and by association</i></p>

<p><i>maintain</i> the said establishment, even when we shall be the only three to remain in the said Society and we shall be obliged to beg and live bread alone.</p> <p>Wherefore, we promise to do unanimously and with a common agreement all that we shall believe in conscience and without any human consideration to be for the greatest good of the said Society</p> <p>Done this 21st day of November feast of the Presentation of the Most Blessed Virgin.</p> <p>In testimony whereof we have signed.</p>	<p><i>gratuitous schools</i>, wherever I may be, even if I were obliged in order to do so, to beg and to live on bread alone, <i>or to do whatever in the said Society at which I shall be employed, wether by the body of this Society, or by the Superiors who will have the government thereof.</i></p> <p>Wherefore, I promise and vow obedience to the body of the Society as well as to the Superiors; which vows of association, as well as stability in the said Society, and of obedience, I promise to keep inviolably all my life.</p> <p>In testimony whereof I have signed.</p> <p>Done at Vaugirard, this 6th day of June, feast of the Most Holy Trinity, in the year one thousand six hundred and ninety-four.</p> <p>De La Salle.</p>
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II. The meaning of the Vows according to the formulas of 1691 and 1694

- A. A reminder of the past and hope for the future
- B. Commitment expressing a prior commitment to the plan of God
- C. Commitment to an established yet open-ended apostolate
- D. A commitment to a personal and community search
- E. Thrust and structures of the commitment

It remains to examine the meaning of the vows according to the formulas of 1691 and 1694. In light of what has just been said, it is worthwhile studying, however briefly, the formulas used by De La Salle and by the brothers at the time the vows were taken in 1691 and 1694. Certain historical facts aid in understanding these formulas properly.

The formula of 1686 was not preserved. It is not impossible that at that time a text, more or less like the ones we are going to examine, was used. Brother Maurice Auguste has proposed a "maximum" text which could have been used, but this is a hypothesis.

The formula of 1691 was that of the vow taken by De La Salle and by Gabriel Drolin and Nicholas Vuyart on November 21 of that year. It was a "secret" vow: this can explain why no handwritten copy is remaining. It has been preserved by Blain. Its authenticity is beyond doubt, and it is likely that Blain learned of it from Drolin himself after his return from Rome.

The formula of 1694 has come down to us in fourteen copies: thirteen in the Book of the first vows, the fourteenth, on a simple piece of paper, entirely in the hand of the Founder. This formula remained substantially in use until the reception of the Bull, and essentially we still use it. But it was only in 1694 that each of the thirteen persons making vows named the twelve others with whom he was committing himself.

The formula of vows which is considered the work of De La Salle is no doubt original. Brother Maurice Auguste's study shows how its particular tonality is far removed from the dry juridical language of any number of previous texts as well as from the flowery and redundant language popular in the Founder's day.

Finally, in both of these cases, we are dealing with significant and rich actions, not with conventional and predetermined acts.

A. A reminder of the past and hope for the future

De La Salle and his brothers did not begin by pronouncing vows. The vows grew out of a historical process at a given time. They recalled an *experience* that was first of all lived.

It was a *human* experience of an association that took birth and progressed with men whose names we know; a human experience of a specific enterprise which gave rise to the community and gave life to its inspiration and its structures: the community was destined to carry out an urgent task, the "salvation" of neglected youth; a human experience of a difficult undertaking: when those who vowed themselves spoke of "begging alms and living on bread alone", it was not an echo of romantic heroism, but a reference to something already experienced in the Society.

It was a *religious, Christian and spiritual* experience in the strongest sense of these words. In particular, this is the meaning of the reference to the Trinity in the introductory words of the formula. It signified that these men were entering into existential dialogue with the living God who had called them and was sending them forth. But this religious experience is not to be understood as dissociated from human experience.

The formula of vows, by recalling a lived experience, affirms its *actuality*: here and now, in the very act of committing oneself by vows a person's previous history is given expression and, in a sense, brought to completion. When De La Salle pronounced the vows with Drolin and Vuyart in 1691 and with his twelve companions in 1694, this constituted not only a ratification of the past, but also a crucial reinforcement of the hesitant beginning they had already experienced. The full force of these acts is shown by the historical context: the vows of 1691 started from a hopeless situation, but it established a three fold basis upon which the community consciousness of the young Society could be built; the vows of 1694, agreed upon at the end of a ten-day meeting, effectively made explicit a community consciousness welded together during those days of deliberation and of retreat. The very next day, making explicit reference to this act of association, the same twelve brothers decided that a future superior would be one of their own number and not a priest.

Thus, at a crucial point of time, by accepting and affirming their experience in the act of committing themselves by vows the brothers opened up the totality of their future personal history which was tied inseparably to their work. This dynamic opening to a future, which each brother committed himself to realize in a community, is inseparable from an openness toward God. Such an understanding gives a broader meaning to expressions such as "I consecrate myself entirely to you". Too often the totality of the consecration is analyzed in static categories: I give to God all that I am, all my goods, my affectivity, my liberty, my time. This vow formula suggests another totality, a more human one, by clearly opening out to an objective yet to be carried out. At the same time, the image of the God to whom one consecrates himself is not so much that of a sovereign requiring "everything", or even of a tremendous Lover, although this is not necessarily excluded, as that of a living Power who, while he welcomes the here and

now, is also moving toward a future. A brother making vows is like a worker whose work is already carried out in this very consecration, but at the same time in the process of completion; and one associates himself with this objective as a free and responsible person. This leads to an entirely different notion of fidelity, oriented much more to the future rather than to the past.

B. The commitment by vows expresses a Mystery being worked out in history

At the outset the two vow formulas refer to the mystery of the living God, the Trinity, and love, in the solemn language of theocentric spirituality typical of that time. Everything starts from the living God. Everything goes back to him and to his Glory. But this theocentrism should not obscure the importance of man, his history, his becoming, his responsibility, and his initiative. The historical and concrete dimension is present everywhere in the vow formulas.

- There is explicit mention of the real men who commit themselves and with whom one is committed. There is no anonymity, no otherworldliness.

- Importance is given to human initiative, good will, human activity (cf. “to procure by all our power and all our efforts...”, “to procure your glory as far as I am able...”).

- Mention is made of the precise concrete objective to which the brothers are committed : a temporary but also definitive objective at the time of the vows of 1691 (to procure and maintain the said establishment) and a permanent objective (to have gratuitous schools). This objective is to be given its full historical force: the gratuitous schools are those schools in which the brothers are working, which allow those poor and abandoned young, for whose salvation the brothers consecrate their lives, to have access to a rudimentary culture and education in the living faith. The historical importance of this concrete objective has to be emphasized in order to understand how it constituted a satisfying and decisive *raison d’être* for those who discovered it along with De La Salle during the course of their lives. It meant much more than “teaching school” or “having schools” in a general kind of way.

The historical and concrete situation is at least implicit also in the human process of discernment whereby this response is given day by day. The formula of 1691 is particularly explicit: “to do unanimously and with a common consent all that we believe in conscience to be of the greatest good for the Society”. The vow places emphasis on this objective of discernment: it also entails serious consequences as well as a leap into the unknown. In the formula of 1694, this human process of discernment is more implicit. Nevertheless, one can compare “obedience to the superiors and to the body of the Society” (1694) with “to do unanimously...”: obedience supposes discernment.

The theocentric dimension should not be dissociated from the concrete historical dimension. Mystery is actualized in history. Note here the significance of the words, “and for this end,” “that is why,” which show that it is really in association that the consecration of the brothers to God is accomplished ; it is in the school work that the glory of God is sought. Note also the parallelism between the two expressions of 1691 and 1694:

1691	1694
<p>We consecrate ourselves entirely to you to procure... the establishment of the Society of the Christian Schools.</p>	<p>I consecrate myself entirely to you to procure your glory</p>

This parallelism is explained by comparisons with the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* which are a commentary on the expression, “I consecrate myself entirely to you”. There we find expressions such as: “to give your life to contribute to the salvation of youth” (198,2); “to sacrifice yourself and to spend your whole life in order to give them a Christian education” (201,3); “offer yourself to God in order to help the children confided to you to the extent that he will ask it of you” (197,2).

With regard to the expression “to procure your glory”, a glance at the word “procure” in the vocabulary of the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* shows the equivalence between “procure the glory of God” and “procure the salvation of children”. *The glory of God is a man fully alive!*

On the other hand, concrete human history, with all its contingencies and the consequences that flow from responsible human commitment, derives its total importance and meaning from the fact that by it is accomplished effectively the work of salvation of man by God, that is, “the glory of God”. A religious orientation to life does not dispense from the great consequences of human options and activities; in fact, it is the contrary that is true.

The expression “heroic” has real meaning (“to beg alms and to live on bread alone”). Its radical and totalizing character comes to grips with a human, visible objective, seen in its eschatological significance, that is, in its noble role of manifesting and carrying out the work of salvation.

Compare the expressions:

1691	1694
to procure by all our power and all our efforts	to procure as far as I am able

The “as far as I am able” may appear subjective and even a bit weak, a sort of “I’ll do my best”. But the comparison with the 1691 parallel sheds another light on this formula by objectifying it “by all our power and all our efforts”. This takes seriously the idea of ministry in all its concrete details, about which the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* speak so often (“you should esteem your ministry,” “you should examine how seriously you have carried it out...”); this is the living out of the talents that the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* refer to also. It is especially important to note the weight given to the educational relationship with these poor and abandoned children. In the exercise of this ministry, the educational relationship is obviously manifest but so is the consecration of oneself to God. This is evident from the stress in the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* on the apostolic activity, the site of the evangelization of the apostle, of his growth in Christ.

Compare the expressions:

1691	1694
to procure the establishment... in the manner which will appear <i>to us</i> to be most agreeable <i>to you and</i> most advantageous for the said Society.	to procure your glory... as you will require of me.

The formula of 1694 refers generally to the will of God and could be understood in an overly individualistic way or in a passive or fatalistic way. But in the light of 1691, it could

be understood in an entirely different way, in greater human and religious depth. The formula of 1691, on the one hand, expresses that the search for the will of God is brought about by a human and community discernment; on the other hand, the reference to the glory of God is not dissociated from the search for the good of the Society; but, of course, as the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* show, especially in the theme of judgment, the search for “the good of the Society” must be referred constantly to the finality of the Society and to “the glory of God”.

C. Commitment to an established yet open-ended apostolate

At the time they took vows, both in 1691 and 1694, De La Salle and his brothers knew enough about life to grasp precisely and in all its details their specific work; although it was already begun, their task was to consolidate it by coordinating its different parts.

The gratuitous schools for abandoned youth demanded that a Society be constituted, a Society of men grasped by the living God in the very needs of these young people who were far from salvation, a Society of men who desired, by giving themselves entirely to procure the salvation of youth, to work for the glory of God. The experience of De La Salle with his brothers, as well as his spiritual commitment, also emphasizes each of these elements, but their true meaning is understood only if each element is seen in reference to the others and to the whole. Otherwise the totality risks being broken into tiny pieces, destroying it through stress on the particular elements: the CONSECRATORY “tendency” (emphasizing “the religious life”); or the COMMUNITY one (priority is given to the community); or the SOCIOLOGICAL one (“the return to the poor”); or the CATECHETICAL or the WORK-THEORY (the work of the schools); or the PEDAGOGICAL.

The vows pronounced by the brothers in 1691 and 1694 proclaimed the reality of their project and gave it solidity by witnessing to its various parts and by expressing their will to bring it about.

This apostolate of the Brothers is also *open-ended*: it has to do with a future to be brought about. Commitment does not concern itself with keeping things as they are, with obligations to be fulfilled. It is a history to be carried out in a definite way, requiring a permanent search, a community of discernment, some reference to an objective. The act of commitment has to do with successive and unforeseeable commitments, when each moment is given as much fullness as possible (“as far as I am able”). It is an attempt to live this fullness in reference to an objective that transcends the instant in which it is actualized, with everything, as it were, in perpetual motion.

This analysis is particularly important and may be confirmed by the spiritual doctrine of the Founder, especially in the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*, as well as by the way he understood his own life (“one commitment led me to another...”). Such an analysis would replace the tendency to concentrate on details or on a juridical view of the vow commitment, particularly in association with the three vows — although the “explanations” of the obligations of the vows, even in the lifetime of the Founder tended to be moralizing and to make of the vows an end in themselves.

D. A commitment to a personal and community search

Up until this point the emphasis has been on the personal dimension of the commitment. Each brother pronounces the vow. Each brother recognizes in his personal existence the call of God and, in the expression used in the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*, he takes responsibility (“Take the responsibility to sacrifice yourself...”). Each brother tries to answer according to his own personality (“as far as I am able”); to

make of his response a personal adventure in which his relationship to God is expressed and not someone else's ("as *you* will require of *me*").

But at the same time, it is also a *community* commitment: it is formulated by men who together commit themselves; it aims essentially to constitute an association. This association must be understood in all its dimensions, especially in its historical, personal and transcendent origin and in its finality. This association has for its objective a common mission whose realization demands a community of discernment and of action.

It is important to note here again the vital link between two dimensions: the personal relationship to God comes about and is deepened by the mediation of the community. "I consecrate myself entirely to you" corresponds to "I promise and vow to unite myself".

Furthermore, the personal realization of a life given to the service of God is mediated by a community service:

"to procure your glory" corresponds to "to keep together gratuitous schools".

The search for the will of God, different for each person, is realized in an activity of community discernment:

"as you will require of me" corresponds to "to do unanimously and with a common agreement", "obedience", and "whatever employment I shall have".

On the other hand, the community constitutes neither an end in itself nor a constraining group. It exists only by the free consent of persons, not only in its beginning but continually. Each person in community remains perfectly open to the God who has grasped him personally, while the community loses all human meaning as religious if it is not a place of liberation of persons. The community faces God; it is an education in the Gospel love and fidelity toward God, a place where one and all celebrate the marvels of the love of God for his people, a place to discover and marvel at the ever fundamental fidelity of the Living God. In addition, the personal commitment to the community has reference to the apostolate of the community. The parallelism between the formula of 1691 and the formula of 1694 shows that obedience (1694) supposes a discernment of the context in which each brother exists (1691): each of the brothers who made vows in 1694 commits himself to "the body of the Society, and each also is a living member of this body.

To sum up, a person commits himself in order to live his life, his own history, together with others. Each person as well as the community is transcended by reference to the God living in man and by reference to the glory of God through the activity of man and for the salvation of men: points of reference that are transcendent but also historical.

E. Thrust and structures of the commitment

What is the relationship between the inspiration motivating the brothers and the structures underpinning their commitment? The two vow formulas reveal a thrust toward God by responding to his initiative and a thrust toward the salvation of children. This thrust or inspiration is primary, but the structure given to it is equally visible, even in its juridical reality: it is a community structure with a clearly recognizable external form and a clearly defined task. The structures express the thrust and make it concrete. The thrust gives rise to and sustains the structures. Yet this dialectic seems to have disappeared once the "vows" were imposed as a pre-established structure which one has to make.