

**INSTITUTE OF SPIRITUALITY AND RELIGIOUS FORMATION  
TANGAZA COLLEGE**

**LASALLIAN FORMATION AND THE BILEN MARRIAGE  
COVENANT: A CASE FOR INCULTURATION**

**ESSAY SUBMITTED TO THE INSTITUTE OF SPIRITUALITY  
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FORMATION**

**BY**

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**NAIROBI-KENYA**

# STUDENT'S DECLARATION

## LASALLIAN FORMATION AND THE BILEN MARRIAGE COVENANT: A CASE FOR INCULTURATION

BY ARON IYOB

I, the undersigned, declare that this long essay is my original work achieved through my personal reading, research method and critical reflection. It is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Diploma of Religious Formation and Spirituality. It has never been submitted to any other college or university for academic credit. All sources have been cited in full and acknowledged.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_



Name of Student: Br. Aron Iyob

Date: March 2002

This long essay has been submitted for examination with my approval as the college supervisor.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_



Name of Supervisor: Rev. Fr. Ireneo Barreto, SVD

Date: March 2002

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this Essay to my Family and to the De La Salle Brothers in Eritrea.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

My moderator, Fr. Ireneo Barreto, SVD who spared his time and energy to check and correct my paper owes special thanks. I wish also to express my appreciation and deepest gratitude to Br. Finbarr Murphy, FSC, who checked my first draft and offered me with his rich constructive suggestions that mere words cannot be value for. I am grateful with the genuine co-operation and accountability of all informants and interviewees who were so happy and willing to share their age-accumulated knowledge with me. Finally I am indebted to forward special thanks to Sch. Estifanos Helafu who typed my essay without considering his time and energy and also to my professors who offered me all the courses from which I am acquainted with sufficient knowledge. Similarly, I feel great pleasure to express my deepest thanks to my parents, relatives, and to all De La Salle Brothers.

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## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The main purpose of this paper is to enrich the Lasallian formation program in Eritrea by incorporating into it some elements from the *Blin* marriage tradition. Therefore, Chapter I deals with Lassallian religious formation, the Lasallian charism, Lassallian spirituality and the identity of the De La Salle Christian Brother.

The second chapter deals with *Blin* marriage. It explains who the *Blin* people are, their concept of marriage, the way they intermarry, and how they handle engagement and marriage.

The third chapter deals with how the elements of *Blin* marriage can be incorporated into Lassallian religious formation in Eritrea.

As for the methodology followed for this research, the author has mainly used books written regarding *Blin* people, and others which have similarities in cultural concepts, and conducted interviews with few *Blin* people who have deep knowledge regarding *Blin* marriage.

# CHAPTER I

## LASALLIAN FORMATION

### Introduction

John Baptist De La Salle is the founder of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. He was an educational reformer, and an expert in pedagogy. He was born in Rheims, France in 1651 into the wealthy and noble family of Louis De La Salle and Nicole Moet De Brouillet. He was the eldest child of the surviving seven children of his family.

In 1680 he founded the Brothers who by then were referred to as schoolmasters. This marks the beginning of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. De La Salle died in 1719 at St. Yon in Rouen after a long illness. In 1900 he was canonized by Pope Leo XIII and proclaimed "heavenly patron of all teachers, men and women alike, clerical as well as lay, actually engaged in, or preparing for, the profession of teaching."<sup>1</sup>

### 1.1 Brothers of the Christian Schools

De La Salle gave St. Joseph and St. Cassian as patrons to his institute. However, he did not call himself or his disciples Brothers of St. Joseph or St. Cassian. They were sometimes called "Brothers of St. Yon"<sup>2</sup> from the property where the motherhouse then was. However, the Brothers themselves did not use that name.

In 1690, when De La Salle had to defend himself before the ecclesiastical superiors of Paris on the question of the habit adopted by the Brothers, he was not afraid to reaffirm

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<sup>1</sup> [www.lasalle.org/English/Current/15maybrief.html](http://www.lasalle.org/English/Current/15maybrief.html)

<sup>2</sup> Maurice Herman, FSC, Lasallian Brother of the Christian Schools, Rome, September, 1983.

the uniqueness of a creation which he himself defined as "the community of the Christian schools and its members as the Brothers of the Christian schools".<sup>3</sup>

## 1.2 Charism of the Brothers of the Christian Schools

The word 'charism' has come into the vocabulary of De La Salle institutions quite recently, at least in the sense it has today. This usage reflects the growth in our sensitivity to biblical vocabulary, and religious literature generally.

In the New Testament the concept of charism is quite clear. It signifies various services and areas of activity, as well as the means of accomplishing them. It is always a reality that is outgoing, expressing an activity and a way of being present to humanity in service of the Kingdom. Indeed, it is a grace, a gift from God. It is an "outward-looking concept of ministry because it adds the specific connotation of a specific grace from the Lord."<sup>4</sup>

One proposal is that today we might possibly understand as charism the spirit of the De La Salle institute as seen from the outside, i.e. from the point of view of its operations, its witness and its service.

De La Salle, devoted his life to young people, especially the poor and most in need. This call urged him to form schoolmasters who were totally dedicated to teaching and to Christian education. These are today the Brothers of the Christian Schools whose charism is teaching. The Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, states "the Brothers in fidelity to the call of the Spirit and the charism of the founder consecrate themselves to God in order to exercise, by association, their apostolic ministry of education".<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Br. Edwin Bannon, Lassalian, No. 2, February, Rome, 1984

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>5</sup> Ibidem.

### 1.3 Spirituality of De La Salle, DLS

Lasallian<sup>6</sup> spirituality not bound to any particular devotion. The foundation spirituality cannot be reduced to a spiritual theory. John Baptist DLS wrote about perfection and other aspects of Christian life but none of these solely represents his contribution to the Brother's heritage.

The spirituality of DLS is consistent on the one hand with his concept of Christian life as centred on the essential, that is, faith in God and commitment to others, and on the other hand, with the life he himself led, as this witnessed his words.

Even if the spirituality of DLS was written for his Brothers, its concept is valid for all Christians. "The spirit of this institute is first, a spirit of faith, which should induce those who compose it not to look upon anything but with the eyes of faith, not to do anything but in view of God and to attribute all to God. Secondly, the spirit of their institute consists in an ardent zeal for the instruction of children and for bringing them up in the fear of God."<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile the spirituality of St. John Baptist illustrates that of a person, responsible to God's call, who enters daily into new relations with the Lord, with people and those with whom he shares his faith.

### 1.4 The Lasallian Religious Formation

"Formation is the process by which something develops into a particular thing or shape".<sup>8</sup> According to the Guide of Formation of DLS Brothers, It "is a process of growth in faith, which leads to and results in Christian and Lasallian maturity".<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Lasallian*: adjectival form of De Le Salle.

<sup>7</sup> Brother Patrice, *Lasallian*, Oct. Rome, 1984.

<sup>8</sup> Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, International Students Edition, Printed in Spain by Caytosa, Barcelona, 1999.

<sup>9</sup> Brothers of the Christian Schools, *Guide for Formation*, General Council, Rome 1991, p. 24.

“The formation of candidates is one of the Institute’s major preoccupations. The vitality of the DLS institute depends on the quality and the fidelity of each of its members.”<sup>10</sup> It is important to remember that our founder did more than committing himself to God by vow; before and after that event, he made decisions. Therefore, it is interesting to reflect on the decisions he made in establishing the novitiate, and on how he revised significantly the existing program of formation.

### **1.5 Formation in the Vocation of the Brothers**

The founder believes that, “God has willed to make people holy and save them, not as individuals without any bond or link between them but rather to make them into people who might acknowledge him and serve him in holiness.”<sup>11</sup>

God takes the initiative to call all people in all periods of history; a person, attentive to God's plan and the tangible existence of his brothers/sisters, responds freely. That is why the life of each person and, in particular, the life of each Christian is a sign of the saving presence of God and his Kingdom.<sup>12</sup>

“The Bible: As the word of God and of human beings contains numerous accounts of vocation which encapsulate God’s call and people’s response; Abraham (Gen 4); Gideon (Judg 6), Samuel (Isa 3), Isaiah (Isa 6), Jeremiah (Jer 1), Peter (Luke 5), Mary (Luke 1), Zachaeus (Luke 19) and Paul (Act 9).”<sup>13</sup>

In these accounts of vocation everything begins with a call from God who allows it to be seen or heard directly or through an intermediary. This manifestation of God is

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<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem, p. 19.

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem, pp. 19-20.

perceived by a person whose life is being lived in a precise historical situation. She/He listens to God's message, which indicates always a mission to be accomplished according to his plan. The first reaction of the person called is usually surprise, fear and reluctance but immediately afterwards signs appear which confirm the good news and the mission. From that point onwards, the only response possible is the acceptance of the divine plan and the accomplishment of the new order willed by God for the salvation of people and the world.<sup>14</sup>

"Vocation cannot be reduced to an initial call or to the moment when a decision is made after mature deliberation. It is rather a series of deliberate choices made over the course of a life time."<sup>15</sup>

The formation of the person requires a sufficient degree of self knowledge, which is shown by the ability to speak about oneself, to direct one's own life, to maintain a certain level of personal relationship, and to support the natural tensions of everyday life. The formation of the person is never a process of spontaneous growth.

"Formation in religious life implies a sufficient understanding of our own deep personal aspirations, as well as openness to those around us and docility towards the spirit present in our life."<sup>16</sup>

Formation therefore implies a realistic knowledge of oneself and an acceptance of one's own strengths and weaknesses. This will make it possible to have the openness that is needed towards oneself, God and others. Supported by the lifestyle in formation community, the candidate develops and lives according to the options which gradually identify him with Christ. In the same way, doctrinal formation, by means of appropriate and systematic theological studies, helps him to understand God, Christ, the Church, the founder, the institute and the world in which we are living.

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Ibidem, p. 20.

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem, p. 24.

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem, pp. 27-28.

## 1.6 Initial Formation

The De La Salle Brothers' initial formation program consists of aspirancy, postulancy, novitiate and scholasticate. This might also vary from place to place and some might not have aspirancy.

Initial formation is by its nature a long process which requires enough time to pass successively through certain stages. It is not so much a question of assimilating information or exteriorizing patterns of behaviors, but rather becoming a new creature modeled on the beatitudes and the spirit of the institute.

The formation of a Brother of Christian schools involves a process of growth as a follower of Jesus, "inspired by the Gospel, considered as the first and principal rule"<sup>17</sup> and by the Charism of St. John Baptist DLS, which has been adapted and brought up-to-date by the institute. Initiated by the Brothers, the candidate begins a progress of human, spiritual and apostolic growth which will lead him from commitment to commitment, to live his vocation to the full.

This initiation requires on the part of the candidate and on that of Brothers who accompany him a relationship of ever increasing quality. It is only on the basis of this existential and fraternal dialogue, which is superior to any theory, that true formation is possible.

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<sup>17</sup> The Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, Rome, 1987, 25.

## **Conclusion**

The life of the founder and the history of the first Brothers, his companions, show how in their determination to follow Christ, they consecrated themselves entirely to him, adapting the traditional elements of the consecrated life to their specific mission. This consecrating urge is central to the Brothers' life of whatever kind; it concerns their relationship to God. It is not something which is added to their basic formation, but it is a specific manner of living their relationship to God, to people, to their Brothers, as well as to the world and to themselves.

# CHAPTER II

## BLIN MARRIAGE

### Introduction

The *Blin* tribe is one of the nine tribes found in Eritrea. They migrated from the Northern part of Ethiopia. The *Blin* people are also known as the *Bogos* People. They are settled in an area called Senhit, present Zoba Anseba, in the central and northern parts of Eritrea. According to the census of 1995, the population of the *Blin* people is 70,000. This ethnic group is Cushitic.

### 2.1 Concept of Marriage

The concept of marriage might vary in various societies taking into consideration the varieties of their cultural, historical, geographical and other social factors.

For the *Blin* people marriage is a passage into a new realm of union and covenant. To discern and know the will of God, as much as possible, the marriage should be finalized and accepted by those who are considered the most responsible and mature members of the society such as the elders. This union comprises the total dimensions of life between the whole tribes/clans of the two candidates. In the *Blin* concept, this reality of union is much deeper and more unique than the other intimacies within which they carry on their daily lives. The essence of this union is based on blood. For *Blin* blood symbolizes life. And blood relationship in its deepest meaning is called *molad*. When a *Blin* thinks of marriage, the first thing that comes into his/her mind is unending life. Unending life includes both life in this

world and the next, life after death.<sup>18</sup> Practically, marriage according the *Blin* people, changes the destructive nature of death and transforms it to unending life.

Through procreation, one beats death, one brings together the three dimensions of time: past, present and future. In a real sense, one's own being is perpetuated or continued through their children; even if one spouse dies eventually, his/her name is carried on and not lost; the torch of life is handed down and begins to burn anew.<sup>19</sup>

This unending life is realized when the purpose of marriage is awarded with a gift of children. For the *Blin*, the ultimate goal of marriage is having children as far as the mother is able to give birth. The children are the ones who replace those who pass away from this world and carry the name of the ancestors. Premarital sexual relationship and pregnancies outside marriage are taboos and are considered a curse from the ancestors and God. Sexual relationship is only allowed when God, the ancestors and the elders bless it through the ceremony of marriage.

## **2.2 Girl's Change of Character**

Before the girl reaches puberty, she works for her family in the same way as a boy does. Until the age of 15 she fetches water, gathers fire-wood and looks after large or small cattle. When her physical appearance gradually develops, she becomes reserved and all her activities are confined to the house. Her attitudes toward herself and her parents change. She starts to feel as if she does not belong to the house anymore, because sooner or later she

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<sup>18</sup> Fr. Fishaye Bahta, a Cistercian Father, 3<sup>rd</sup> year 'Social Science' student in CUEA and Br. Tinseaw Menghistu, de La Salle Brother, 4<sup>th</sup> year CTIE student at Tangaza, both were interviewed by the author on 12<sup>th</sup> of February 2002.

<sup>19</sup> John S. Mbiti, Marriage and Life, p. 129.

knows that she will get married. At this period she starts to go to dances which run for days, even for weeks, with her friends.<sup>20</sup>

For both sexes of the *Blin* youth, it is not easy to express their love through dancing. However, they have great desire and ability to play day and night without interruption. There is a time in which they prefer dancing to eating. When they hear the beat of a drum, they travel for more than seven kms. by night in order to take part in the dancing. Even though this is a tendency of both sexes, it is the girls that have a greater role to play in the traditional dancing.

### **2.3 Engagement**

The way the parents seek out a girl for their boy, the property given for the engagement settlement, and the covenant made between the boy's and girl's family, express the value of the girl, and the validity and firmness of the rite.

Twenty years ago the engagement transactions were mostly in kind, but today are paid in cash.

### **2.4 The Manner of Looking for a Girl**

When a girl or a boy becomes an adult her/his parents are free to give her/him to any one they want. This tradition, which was widespread in the country, today is gradually changing; both, the boy as well as the girl, freely choose their partner.

When a girl is asked for marriage an intermediary acts between the two families. First he contacts the girl's parents in a diplomatic way and asks them for their daughter's hand in marriage in order to persuade them. He presents usually in exaggerated ways, the

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<sup>20</sup> Elderly Brothers, *Gerbeshha*, Asmara: Hidri Publication, 1997, p. 57.

good qualities of the boy and his parents. Usually, he puts his request in this form: "I am sent by so and so who wants your daughter for his son, for he wants to create new relations of flesh, bones and blood with you."

If the father of the girl doesn't accept the request, in other words, if he doesn't want to create a blood relationship with the family of the boy who asks for his daughter, he tells the intermediary that he is going to discuss the matter with the elders of his clan. This is the polite way of saying "No, I don't want." However, if one agrees positively with the request made, he replies, "Let it be for our mutual prosperity (God)".

Then the intermediary proceeds to make contact with the girl's kin *exrsko ferae*<sup>21</sup> and eventually starts the bargaining for the materials, which will be given during the day of engagement from the boy's side. This contact is made in the absence of both the girl and the boy. The two are informed of what is going on. On his side, when the father of the young man receives positive answer from the father of the girl, he informs all the elders of his family; this is to obtain official approval which usually is based on his will, unless it poses serious problems for the life of the family and the clan.

## **2.5 Materials Needed for Engagement and Marriage Settlement**

The materials for engagement and marriage are:-

- Five quintals of grain.

- Thirteen cows, which are given at different times: one is slaughtered before the wedding day. *Metlu day* is a day in which the bride's family goes to the bridegroom's family to collect the cattle.

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<sup>21</sup> '*Ekrsko Ferae*' refers to the clans of both partners.

The second is slaughtered for dinner for those who are invited to the girl's wedding.

Six cows must be shown to the council, with the following qualities:

Four heifers: one of which must be already mated, and two calves. The price of the remaining ones are to be paid in cash.<sup>22</sup>

The men who go to settle the engagement from the boy's relatives usually number seven; from the girl's relatives only men welcome the seven at the courtyard. The boy's relatives bring with them ten meters of white cloth which is a sign of light. At the entrance both sides finalize the sacred pact in the name of God, which is called *Meakot Tuna* and then enter a *dass* which is a temporal shelter prepared for the guests. The fact that both sides conclude the sacred pact at the entrance shows the seriousness and deep validity of the covenant which binds them mutually. This ceremony is given top priority. On the other hand, the number 'seven' from both sides represents 'completeness' and 'wholeness' of representation. In *Blin*, the number seven is a complete, perfect number. That is why even when the elders bless the bride, they wish her to be the mother of 'seven' boys. Hence, the number of elders representing each family is always seven.

## 2.6 Meakot (The Covenants)

Both families sit outside the house forming a circle and put the ten meters of white cloth in the middle as a sign of light which shines among the council of elders, and is meant to bring good fortune to the couple. An elder leads the prayer and the *mengora*, intermediary, mentions the *semy*, requirements. Then a neutral leading elder stands in front of them and addresses the parties in the following way:

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<sup>22</sup> Br. Amanuel Shahr, "Adveniat Regnum Tuum". 39th Year, No. 64 2nd Semester 1996, p. 76.

1. To the girl's family he says, "Do you give your daughter to our son?" All the girl's family respond, "Yes we do."
2. To the boy's family, "Are you willing to take our daughter to your son?" All the family of the boy responds, "Yes we do."
3. To the girl's family he affirms: "May this pact be for you as God's covenant, for you have given him your daughter." All the girl's families respond, "Yes, let it be for us as God's covenant that we have given him our daughter."
4. To the boy's family he affirms again: "May this covenant be for you as God's covenant that you have received her." All the boy's family responds, "Yes let it be as God's covenant for us that we have received her for him." Each of these exchanges and affirmations are repeated four times to show the seriousness of the pact. In the meantime all the participants touch the ground to symbolize the strength and firmness of the contract. After this solemn act they enter the *dass* to have lunch and in the evening the boy's family returns to their village. From the time of engagement up to marriage the girl hides herself not only from her *fiancé*, but also from his relatives. Even if there was an intimate relationship between them, she is obliged to withdraw until after the engagement. If she does not do so, she must face insults from the society. Therefore she hides herself; the culture compels her to do so.

The significance of the girl's hiding herself from the *fiancé* and his family throughout this period is mainly to show that she respects them more than anyone else due to the covenant made between the families. On the other hand, it shows also that they have entered into a special kind of relationship that is different from the normal boy/girl relationship.

During the time between engagement and marriage, the girl's family receives different gifts or presents from the boy's family, but they do not reciprocate. This is interpreted in two ways: on the one hand, it expresses the greatness of the woman; and on the other, the boy's gifts to the girl might imply authority over her, in the future.

## 2.7 Metlu (The Bride Cattle)

*Metlu* is a dowry in the form of cattle given to the girl by the boy's father . After the engagement the boy's father, decides the right time for *metlu* to be paid. When he is ready with everything he sends the *mengora* to the father of the girl to announce the date when he will receive the family and hand over the *metlu*. At the same time he informs all the members of his clan of the date when he expects his guests.

The men who come to the *metlu* are usually about 12, six from each family. The boy's family prepares what is necessary for the reception in honour of the girl's family and at the entrance the women welcome them warmly with ululations. The most honoured guest is the girl's father, and in his honour a decorated bed is prepared, because usually the guests stay overnight. Early in the morning the twelve men go for a walk and discuss the number of cattle given to the bride; how many to take and how many to leave. After completion of their debate on the matter, they return to the *dass*<sup>23</sup> to have lunch. Then they ask for a delegate to deliver their decision on the cattle, which are usually six. They take two for the girl's parents and then they distribute others for their daughter; the second for the future father-in-law; the third the *qbitri* for the women who welcomed them; and the fourth cow to any body of their choice.

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<sup>23</sup> *Dass*: Temporary shelter for invited guests.

Then the girl's relatives return to their village with the two cattle received from the boy's family. Once the process of *metlu* is over, the boy's family goes to the girl's family with a mixture of water and milk wishing prosperity and harmony to the future husband and wife. After this visitation, the boy's father can ask for their daughter in marriage. Mixing milk with water represents the future of the two families who are supposed to live in harmony.

## 2.8 Marriage and Dowry

In *Blin* tradition the weddings are restricted to the period November – March, from Christmas up to Ash Wednesday. Because this is harvest season, it makes the economic problem easy. The boy's father accompanied by someone goes to the girl's family to ask them for their daughter in marriage, and fix on a date for the wedding. One month before the wedding day, the girl visits all her relatives for *gewra*, to be blessed and receives some gifts from the mothers. When the date for the wedding ceremony is near, all the members of the young man's family make all necessary preparations. Some of the things that they prepare are:

- a. The women prepare grain for the local drink *silikh*. They put wet grain in a container and cover it with very big leaves from a plant called *gindee*. These leaves help the grain to sprout. The sprouted grain is called *bukur*. Then they grind the *bukur* to become a dough. They cover the dough for some days so that it might ferment. After realizing that the dough is fermented, the women gather together and fry it. This frying of the dough is called *soudera*. In fact, the day is known as *Saudera Girga*, the day of frying the dough. Then they strain the fried dough into some big pots. The juice of the fried dough is

properly covered to ferment and become *silik*; that is the local drink. At the same time, they prepare flour and milk for food.

- b. The young men and women bring firewood and fetch water. The close friends of the bridegroom bring some tall sticks to prepare the oval-shape house for the wedding day. This special and temporary house is the *ablura*. Three days before the actual wedding day, all of these things mentioned above should be ready. These families of both sides borrow all the necessary furniture for the wedding from their neighbors and relatives nearby. The *Ablura* should be ready three days in advance.

Early in the morning the women get up and start to ululate, play the drum and dance to celebrate the ceremony of *simdo*. They cover the young man with a cloth from of his mother-in-law. On his wrist he puts a silver bracelet and a red bead. On his neck also he ties some beads, coloured black and white. On his ear, he puts a golden earring, which belongs to his mother-in-law, and holds a sword and thin stick of *guba* in his right hand. When he finishes this ceremony, the young man is considered officially a bridegroom. Starting from this moment until he finishes one week with his party, a group of 12 friends, he is not allowed to move around alone. Wherever he goes, someone must accompany him. The reason for this is that he might be exposed to the evil spirit.

On the side of the girl, the ceremony of *simdo* takes place in a similar way. They clothe her with a veil from her mother-in-law. The women now taste beer, and ululate. They prepare porridge and spend the day feasting together.

On the wedding day, the bridegroom's father, some other elder relatives and lots of youngsters from the village, altogether called *kxan* (marriage), go to the bride's home village, usually early in the morning. The bride's family awaits them ready for reception.

When the *kxan* approaches the village of the bride, they stop for a moment to make further preparations in order to solemnize their arrival. They organize themselves in such a way that those who can dance and jump with the swords and stay in front, and those who are able to play the drum and sing boldly stay behind. The majority follow the dancers and singers. This is just to organize themselves in a coherent totality. When the *kxan* arrive, the elders enter the *dass* while the youngsters go to dance *golia*. The number of people who are invited to the wedding ceremony is not strictly limited.

After lunch before their departure, the elders from both parties gather and the girl's family officially announces the dowry for their daughter. After the issue of dowry is finalized, if they are Moslems, they perform the ceremony of *akid*. The families of the bride give them some gifts for the Church/Mosque. But if they are Christians, the Sacrament of Matrimony is performed after the ceremony of *simdo*. After having finished the ceremonies of *akid* and matrimony, the young men load their camels and mules with the goods that the bride takes with her from her father's house. They cover the bride completely with white cloth and one of the strongest men holds her on the back of a camel or mule. They accompany the bride and groom to his house dancing and singing.

The bride, at her marriage, is obliged to bring with her all the necessary goods and pieces of furniture for her new house. Some of the materials she should bring include the following:

- About twelve mats of palm leaves, some white and some decorated
- Two milk pots
- One churn used for skimming
- One curtain, *hirbet*

- Two big containers made up of leather, *shebater*.
- Two leather ropes, *shabr*.
- Two small leather containers.
- Two medium sided leather containers, *temamu*.
- One or two troughs.
- One *meklie*, which is an ornament for her house, contains six robes with a length of about two meters decorated by different kinds of beads.
- One *moxombia* which is a cover for a trough and other utensils.<sup>24</sup>

During the departure, all these things are put into a big leather case called *hibsat* and loaded on to a camel or a mule. The best man rides together with the bride to support her on the way and they leave for good chanting their traditional song.

The girls of the village see her off singing the following songs:

"*Eja segnina yshani nired erina*" which means, "Bye, bye our sister, we wish you that the boy's family welcomes you warmly." If she is Christian they sing, "*Brifsnix'nki lawed Myriam tekewrnkut nriawed*," which means, "We wish you goodness and happiness and may the Virgin Mary be your guardian."

The bride spends her honeymoon, the next 40 days, in semi-solitude. Thereafter, the bride cannot go to dances and other recreational activities outside the *ablura*. After four months, around Easter time the bride returns to her mother. After her return the bride also knows that there is another rite. She has to accomplish the traditional way of making herself beautiful by having a smokebath, which lasts for two weeks. During this time her skin

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<sup>24</sup> Fr. Fisehaye Bahta, a Cistercian Father, 3<sup>rd</sup> year 'Social Science' student in CUEA interviewed by the author on the 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2002.

lightens its colour. This method, however, might be dangerous to the health of the spouse if it is done excessively.

## 2.9 The Rite of Initiation of a Young Bride

In order to be considered a full woman, the bride has to go through the rite of initiation. Therefore, in August or September,<sup>25</sup> her mother-in-law, accompanied by two other neighbouring women, goes to the bride's house with three grams of gold to be put on the forehead of the bride, *gesheri*, and a ring of lead to be put on the central part of the head *nfhora*. After having worn these ornaments officially, she becomes a full woman, and assumes all rights and duties in the society.

## 2.10 Cultural Restrictions of a Woman

In *Blin* culture a woman is not obliged to do heavy work. But the culture places some restrictions on her. Usually after marriage she remains house-bound until she becomes a mother of two or three children. This could take five or more years. Again a woman is not allowed to milk cows or camels or goats.<sup>26</sup>

Other restrictions are mostly performed in honour of men:-

- She is forbidden from calling her husband by his name.
- She should always put a veil on her head in the presence of men and she should cover her face in front of her father-in-law, and of her elder relatives. If she does not observe these customs, it is considered a dishonour to the man as well as to the clan.
- She can not inherit her father's property, even if she becomes a widow.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Most of the time, weddings for *Blin* people starts in the month of January and ends up in June unless different reason obliges to be otherwise.

<sup>26</sup> Br. Amanuel Shagr, *Ibid.*, pp. 78-79.

<sup>27</sup> Br. Mahder Arha, De La Salle Brother, interviewed by the author on 25<sup>th</sup> of February 2002.

## Conclusion

For the *Blin* people marriage is a passage into a new realm of union and covenant. To discern and know the will of God as much as possible, the marriage should be fulfilled and accepted by parents and elders.

Marriage for *Blin*, unites people. It is not an affair of the individuals but it brings together families, relatives and friends from each side of the partnership. From this we can understand how seriously marriage is taken by *Blin* people.

From *Blin* marriage we can learn a lot of positive things that we can incorporate in our DLS formation in Eritrea. We are going to see in the next chapter how the positive elements can be applied, to our formation program.

## CHAPTER III

### ELEMENTS OF BLIN MARRIAGE THAT CAN BE INCORPORATED IN THE LASALLIAN FORMATION PROGRAM IN ERITREA

#### Introduction

This chapter deals with how the elements of *Blin* marriage can be incorporated in the Lassallian formation program in Eritrea. It also offers some personal experiences, suggestions and critiques.

#### 3.1 Parents

In the *Blin* tribe, if a son wants to marry, he first informs his parents. Then, after his initiation, the father negotiates with his wife for the betrothal of their son. After their agreement, the father of the young man looks for an intermediary who will negotiate with both families. By co-operating with the intermediary, the parents of both families become seriously involved in the engagement procedures.

#### 3.2 Community

In the *Blin* tribe the community plays a great role; both sets of parents are aware that by getting married they are establishing a social relationship. Marriage has a communitarian aspect, that enriches both society itself and the spouses. Marriage is not just an affair of two individuals alone; it brings families together, relatives and friends from each side of the partnership. One does not marry just one man and woman, but also the relations of their partner, their blood relatives, friends and colleagues too. Therefore, individuals who break these customs become social outcasts, although with modern changes they might escape by

going to live elsewhere. Marriage still remains a social commitment. There are a lot of similarities between *Blin* marriage and the Lasallian religious commitment. Both are commitments in their own ways. In the *Blin* marriage you commit yourself to one man or woman and to the tribe as a whole. In DLS' religious life one commits oneself to God, to the institute and to the world (people of God). There are also some differences. In *Blin*, you inform your parents before you marry and the parents are fully involved. But when the individuals join DLS religious life in Eritrea parents are little involved.

### **3.3 Invitation**

When the individuals join the Brothers, they come on their own or are brought to the Houses of Formation by somebody who knows them. Once they join, their parents are rarely seen in the compound of the Brothers. Some of the parents think that their sons join the Brothers either for priesthood or for studies. This is because the parents know little or nothing about the Brothers. This writer asked one of the Brothers whether his parents were involved in his discernment of his vocation. He answered that his parents knew that he was studying, but not to be a Brother. "Besides my parents know very little about the Brothers" he added. The writer also asked others and most of them gave him similar answers.

In the *Blin* tribe when two people marry, they are not left on their own. Their parents and relatives keep assisting and visiting them. This shows their bondedness and support. So, it is good if we apply this spirit of visiting one another in our DLS formation communities.

The superiors and formators could play a greater role in bringing together the Brothers and their parents. This could be done by visiting their homes and telling them about the Brothers and their vocation. Thus parents could be invited to the Brothers' communities

to share meals and ideas together. This can help the Brothers and the parents to be in support to each other. If this is done the Brothers will feel supported and encouraged and a sense of belonging could be created.

It is advisable to involve the parents of the candidates who want to join the Brothers, or the Brothers who have already joined and are living the religious life. The parents should be invited and be given some information about DLS' Brothers, their work and who they are. It should be clear for them that their sons are in the right place to serve God. The Brothers should also inform their parents about their own life and the life of the congregation when they go back on their home visit.

### **3.4 Intermediaries/Vocation Directors**

In the *Blin* tribe the intermediary, *mengora*, plays a great role in bringing the two families into agreement when giving their children in marriage. Most of the time, the intermediary is sent by the father of the boy who is intending to marry. Then the intermediary makes sure that he convinces the father of the girl. The person who is chosen to be a *mengora* is not just anybody; rather he is an experienced, respected, capable person and known by the people or by the clan.

In the Lassallian formation program in Eritrea, there is no vocation director, *mengora*, who goes all over the country to recruit young people who are interested in our congregation. The young people who join us come from our own schools mostly. The rest are recruited by some parish priests. Most of our Brothers come from almost one province/district, mainly because of the location of our schools.

A part-time vocation director would help the sector to recruit many vocations from all over Eritrea. So, the Brothers can send somebody for training for vocation director or can assign someone who have an experience so as to spread our vocation to all over Eritrea. Otherwise, we may end up having vocation from certain areas only.

### **3.5 Initiation**

*Shingale* is a cultural rite in *Blin* society. All *Blin* adolescent males are subjected to this rite. It is a request for the transition of boys from the status of boyhood to manhood. This *shingale* entitles them to all social legal rights. A boy who has reached puberty, 16 years and above, usually is able to perform this cultural requirement at any time convenient to him. It could be either before, or after or during marriage. Most of the time, particularly nowadays, the rite takes place on the wedding day as part of the marriage. Once the rite has been performed, then he is regarded as a full adult by the society. Consequently he is entitled to the social rights and is subjected to all obligations. To mention some; he may attend and lead meetings, be a member of any religious group or other Christian associations, enter into legal contracts, be a witness, act as a leader, mediator, and can also sue and be sued.

In Eritrea in our DLS' formation, we have an initial formation similar to the one of the *Blin* people which introduces us to the life of DLS Brothers. When one finishes the initiation, one becomes a full member in the Brothers congregation. This initial formation program is well organised and many Brothers have passed through it. Some of the Brothers were positive about their formation; some not so. This may be because of their different

experiences or expectations. Different formators formed their candidates in their own ways, the way they thought was best.

When the candidates join the Brothers, we know that they are not below eighteen. That means they are all adults. So, our formation has to prepare a well-organised program that treats the candidates as responsible adults. Otherwise, if they are formed as receivers only, at the end of the day we will have irresponsible members or passive ones. As in *Blin* society, initiation prepares the individuals to be responsible people, our formation also needs to do likewise. It has to prepare responsible Brothers for our institute. Those are ready to die for the lives they have vowed. So, unless we are careful with the way we form candidates; we will produce irresponsible members.

At this time, we are sending our candidates outside their country for their initial formation. This enriches the individual culture but also affects their understanding of the situation they are in, and they may end up being confused about their vocation. They would end up thinking how to survive in the situation they are in. That consumes a lot of energy and time. In this case, it is good to send Brothers to be trained as formators, before they are placed in formation houses. The formators need to be aware of their candidates and where they come from. This calls for more mutual understanding between the formator and formatee to create an atmosphere that brings them to communicate through dialogue.

### **3.6 Role Models in the Community**

In the *Blin* tribe there are some people who are seen as role models. These role models are not chosen because of any educational qualities or because they are older than others. The role models are those who are naturally living the ideal values of the tribe. They

are the living example for the community. For instance, in *Blin* marriage, the people who play the greatest role are the ones who have not divorced their wives or husbands, elders who have great respect because of their living good example. These, since they are models for the community, are respected because of their reputation. These role models are not taken for granted and people go to them for advice and other kinds of consultations.

The DLS Brothers have been in Eritrea for more than fifty years. Within this time many local Brothers took their final vows. So, we have many elder Brothers who are our role models. They believe in the life they are living; they are totally committed. They work very hard and one can see God in them since they have committed their lives to Him. They are the living examples for the young Brothers who come after them or who have very little experience when compared to theirs. However, the writer does not see many of our Brothers going to them for advice, or for mentoring or spiritual direction. These elders are a resource of the institute but they do not seem to be acknowledged as such. The superiors need to encourage the young Brothers especially those who are in formation to go for mentoring to their elder Brothers. The elder Brothers should also be encouraged to work as mentors or spiritual directors so as to help the young ones.

DLS formators need to be the first models especially to their candidates and also other people. They should be people of honesty, loving, respecting, welcoming and genuine in everything they do. They need to make Christ their model.

"One of the best ways of learning to prepare a clay pot is to live and work for many years with a master potter. There are things that can only be learned in this way; his love for the clay and the product, his way of welcoming clients, thousands of small details which express his love of his craft. Being a good potter is not just a question of knowing the techniques; it also means living a certain spirit, in relationship with the universe and with its beauty."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Jean Vanier, Community and Growth: Our Pilgrimage Together. Griffin House, Toronto, 1979, p. 79.

To be a model does not come from books or other sources but from Jesus himself.

Jesus is the ideal model for formators. Then, the person in turn needs to be the ideal model to others as Jesus is to him/her.

"We need models if we are to put down roots in community life and live the covenant that this implies. We need to live with people who are happy, who have already passed through certain stages and perhaps certain trials, and who have found an inner peace and certain radiance. They do not give lessons but we can enter into their radiance and want to become like them.

The eyes of young people in communities are always fixed on their elders who have lived there for several years. If they appear sad and peevish, the young people will very quickly decide that they do not want to turn out like that; they will believe more or less explicitly that community makes people frustrated. If they see people who are unified, relaxed and unafraid, they will take them as their references."<sup>29</sup>

In this case all the Brothers in the apostolate are expected to be role models to those Brothers in formation in their living example.

### 3.7 Sense of Belonging

Among the *Blin*, there is a sense of belonging. When somebody is marrying he/she knows that he/she is not alone. The person who is marrying belongs to the whole tribe, especially the girl. Everybody participates in his/her own way before, during and after the wedding. The individuals feel they belong to their communities because of the contribution the community makes. They feel supported and united with their people and their ancestors.

"When I visit African villages, I realize that through their rituals and traditions they are deeply living community life. Each person has a sense of belonging to others, men of the same ethnic origin or village are truly brothers".<sup>30</sup>

So as Brothers, we ask ourselves, how much united are we? Do we really feel we belong? Do we also make others feel belonging? What about our formation houses, are they really homes to our candidates or just houses for training? What about formators? Do they feel that they are there in formation houses to make sure they create a sense of belonging?

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<sup>29</sup> Ibidem, p. 80

<sup>30</sup> Ibidem, p. 85

This sense of belonging need to be fostered in De La Salle's formation houses. The DLS' formators in Eritrea should play that great role to create a sense of belonging among the candidates they are forming. As Africans, they need to apply their good cultural values especially the spirit of belonging in their communities.

Individualism, the sense of competition and pride, needs to be abolished from formation houses. The sense of unity, solidarity, and harmony should reign. God has to be the centre of all. As *Blin* people ensure the sense of belonging to their community members, the formator, also need to foster and encourage the spirit of belonging in DLS' formation houses.

### **3.8 Divorce**

In the *Blin* tribe marriage is sacred. If the person has married or engaged to another, it is very hard to break that engagement or marriage. Marriage, or engagement, does not take place easily.

Divorce is the most painful of all marriage problems. In *Blin*, divorce is very rare. It is the final culmination of other marriage problems - the final stage brought about by a number of other factors. Some of the causes of divorce could be unfaithfulness, neglect, or cruelty.

Sometimes, some of our candidates in initial formation are sent away for various reasons. Some of the examples are; unfaithfulness, being disobedient, lack of openness, not being in solidarity with their fellow Brothers, not coming for prayers, breaking some of the rules, or quarrels over different things. Similar to marriage, some should be able to persevere since we are not all perfect. It is good to try hard to bring the candidate back to God and help

him to discern maturely by forgiving him the mistakes he has done. We need not judge him since we do not know his motivations.

Sending the individual away may not solve the problem. Similar to divorce, it may leave some deep scars on the candidate. However, since we are religious, and above all, we are Christians, we need to forgive the individual. If we really see that the person does not belong, he needs to be encouraged to discern on his own so as to remain in communion with the community. Formators should imitate Jesus, the way he won Peter back with all his personal shortcomings and made him the rock of the Church.

### **3.9 Symbol**

There are many symbols that are used by the *Blin* tribe which have particular meanings to express and symbolize things in their daily life. Some of these are:-

- White colour has a significant place. It symbolizes: trust, success, purity and the like.
- Blood symbolizes life.
- Green grass and leaves of *Guba* symbolize fertility and prosperity.

When a DLS Brother is making his vows after his initial formation he is given candles, a cross, star (sign of faith), the New Testament and a rosary. As Christians we see these symbols are good and beautiful. But if they were to be incorporated within the culture of the *Blin* people they would carry more meaning for the individual Brother.

### **3.10 Commitment**

In *Blin* marriage the commitment is very important. If a person commits himself or herself in marriage, it is very hard to divorce the person he/she has committed to. For the *Blin* people divorce is considered as a curse from God.

How do the Brothers see their commitment? What about the candidates in formation? How do they see it? It is good to teach the candidates what a commitment means in their culture and in the culture of the Institute.

### **3.11 Local Language**

*Blin* use their own language when they are committing themselves in marriage. When they are using their language, it gives them greater meaning. In DLS religious life in Eritrea, sometimes English is used as a common language for vows even, for Eritreans. Therefore, even if they vow using English this does not mean anything negative for them. But, it is good if everybody uses his own language in taking vows. It gives more meaning when you pronounce vows in your own language.

### **Reflection and Conclusion**

*I. Parental Bond:-* Among the *Blin* people parents are quite important for the support of the individual vocations. In *Blin* tradition, the parental bond is maintained. This parental bond also needs to be maintained and extended between our Brothers and their parents.

*II. Initiation/Initial Formation:-* In *Blin* marriage, initiation is used as a transition from childhood to adulthood. The Brothers' initial formation program is used to prepare candidates to Brotherhood.

*III. Language:-* *Blin* use their own language when they are committing themselves since it gives them more meaning. Therefore, it is good that the Brothers province their vows in their own language since it can give them more meaning.

*IV. Divorce/Dismissal:-* For the *Blin*, sending a marriage partner away does not solve the problem at stake. Instead, it leaves a scar on the person left behind like the children. The

same thing happens with the dismissal of members of the congregation. It might leave a scar on the member who is sent away, or on those who feel he may have been sent away unjustly.

Despite our human defects, we need to take persons for what they are and appreciate the good values they have. Appreciation of a person means to identify his good values, qualities, talents and cultures. In order to cause effective formation, the new values need to be proposed as a means of growth but not imposed.

## GENERAL CONCLUSION

The Lassallian formation prepares young men for brotherhood to spread the Good News of Christ. They are mostly involved in academic work. In Eritrea, DLS' missions are found largely among the *Blin* tribe. This tribe has its own culture and ways of initiation, which gave the people the identity of belonging to the tribe as full members.

It is time that our Lasallian formation program and aspects of *Blin* culture were integrated. Therefore, I believe that the different stages of initiations of tribes have to be incorporated in the life of the congregation so that it may find true meaning for the candidates in the journey of formation.

In this essay, we widely tried to show that our formation journey has a lot of similarities with the culture of *Blin* people with whom we are living in Eritrea at large. Some people feel, if they don't undergo the traditional initiation of their culture, they do not fully belong to the tribe. However in this essay, we would like to show that even the DLS' formation has stages of initiation, which are similar to the initiations of *Blin* people.

Furthermore, we believe that the families need to be aware of the congregation and the vocation of their own children. They have to know also the charism of the congregation so that they may encourage their children. Their relationship with the members of the congregation also needs to be genuinely fostered.

In the end, we have learnt in this essay to respect the culture of the people with whom we are working and as well as to respect our candidates.

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