



**Brothers of
the Christian
Schools**

Finite Fragile Free



La  Salle



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the Christian
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**Finite. Fragile. Free.
Pastoral Letter to the Lasallian Family**

Br. Armin A. Luistro FSC

Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools
Office of Information and Communication
Generalate, Rome, Italy

December 25, 2023

*Original text in English



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THE GENERALATE

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PASTORAL LETTER TO THE LASALLIAN FAMILY

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The shepherds, says the Gospel of this day, made haste to go over to Bethlehem, where they found Mary and Joseph, and the Infant lying in a manger. On seeing him they recognized what had been told them, and then went back glorifying the Lord for all that they had seen and heard.



Nothing draws souls to God more strongly than the poor and humble condition of those who wish to lead them to him. Why did the shepherds praise and bless God? Because they had seen a poor Infant lying in a manger, and because on seeing him they had recognized, thanks to an interior light with which God enlightened them, that this Infant

was truly their Savior and that it was to him they should have recourse to escape the misery of their sins.



Be convinced that so long as you remain bound in your heart to poverty and to everything that can humble you, you will do good for souls. The angels of God will make you known and will inspire fathers and mothers to send you their children to be instructed, and by your instructions you will touch the hearts of these poor children, and most of them will become true Christians.

But if you do not resemble the newborn Jesus by these two outstanding qualities, you will be little known and little employed, nor will you be loved or appreciated by the poor, and you will never have for them the role of savior, as is proper for you in your work, for you will draw them to God only insofar as you resemble them and Jesus at his birth.

De La Salle Meditation for December 25

Feast of the Nativity of Jesus Christ



Aperture 1680



At the very foundation of our Lasallian story, we encounter deep fissures that could swiftly derail the hopes of anyone dreaming of a better world. Children at risk. Broken families. Nations at war. Societal inequity. Lack of resources. Ineffective instruction. Scarcity of good teachers. Ecclesial dissonance. Not an ideal setting to inspire a Band of Brothers over

three centuries ago to commit their entire lives toward the education of poor children.

Yet consider: these very same fissures and brokenness this side of Heaven allow us to resemble the poor, and, more significantly, Jesus at his birth.

The Founder was ever aware of this vulnerability — in conditions within his control and outside — as well as the fragility of the new family with whom he chose to associate:¹



There were conflicts which impelled the Founder to let go of his authority over the Institute.... There were tensions and problems provoked within the community of the Brothers by both external and internal causes.... The ultimate consolidation of this work of God was not through constant victories towards a grand triumph at the end of De La Salle's life. Rather, what began in a radical incarnation, he learned, was destined to lead him to a total emptying of himself (*kenosis*).

As in many geopolitical situations in the world today, we cannot be blind to the truth that while France was making great strides toward becoming the dominant power in seventeenth-century Europe, its citizens had to pay a steep price.

Jean-Baptiste encountered these wrenching social problems firsthand; he could have leveraged his family connections with the Church hierarchy and other influential leaders to protect his interests. Yet our gentle God drew him with cords of love toward a road less traveled. We may better empathize with the woes he had to endure and appreciate the countercultural impact of his decision to break away from family and societal expectations if we recall the prevailing social conditions at the end of the sixteenth century:²



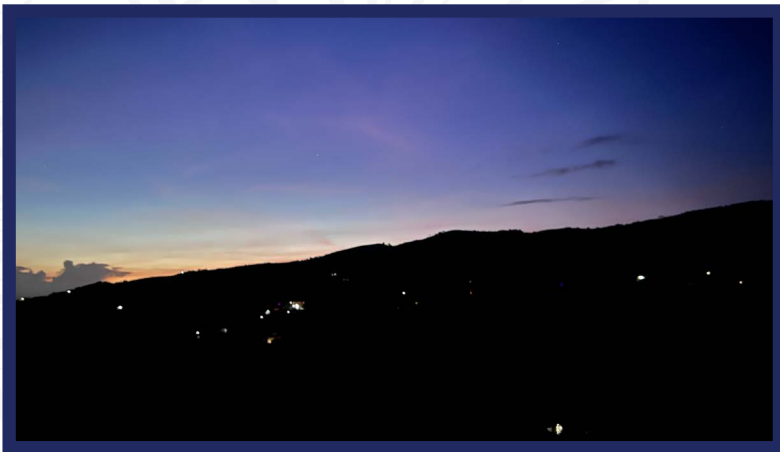
After forty years of civil wars the social structure was riddled with the worst of disorders and the practice of religion had become increasingly abandoned. At all levels of the Catholic hierarchy, made up of men from the upper class, there was every sort of intrigue and complicity to maintain privilege and gain promotions to higher status and greater financial benefit.

Commenting on the Founder's meditation for Christmas day, Br. Miguel Campos links the Christmas story with the spirituality that animates our educational mission even today; one that "stresses the ascetical response to this Christology, namely the acceptance of poverty and lowliness in imitation of the kenosis of Christ. De La Salle is careful to show the Brothers how this spirit is wholly relevant to their educational work."

The mere mention of "ascetical response" may be enough to turn off many today, given the excessive emphasis in the past on inflicting pain and suffering upon oneself as a way of conquering one's inordinate and earthbound desires. Yet the Founder had his eyes fixed on our educational mission and invites us to embrace our weaknesses and limitations as well as inevitable difficulties and inconveniences. To him, these are not just part of the territory for those seeking to serve; they are efficacious means to accompany and encourage those entrusted to our care.



He entreats every Lasallian: “remain bound in your heart to poverty and to everything that can humble you” to “inspire fathers and mothers to send you their children to be instructed, and by your instructions, you will touch the hearts of these poor children...for you will draw them to God only insofar as you resemble them and Jesus at his birth.”³ St. La Salle’s invitation is to imitate the Christ-child in his radical incarnation and not to be afraid to share the deprivation and poverty of those who remain at the margins of society.



It seems to me the best place to *dream together* as a *Lasallian Family with diverse vocations* may be in that little town of Bethlehem where a fragile infant rests in a manger. With the shepherds and farm animals we encounter Emmanuel, God-with-us. We adore in silent contemplation the heavy darkness enveloping our fragmented world even as we listen with attention to the gentle breeze that whispers hope. We embrace our weaknesses — personal, institutional, ecclesial — while fixing our gaze and



marveling with awe at the Eternal Light who chose to reveal himself today as the morning star rising in our hearts.

May we wrap our heads around the global crises in education? Do we have the heart to delve deep into the disconcerting changes in our Church and the world? Are we in touch with the changing demographics and increasing threats to our Lasallian Mission? Or would we rather live in the past and glorify the good old days? Would we rather deny present reality and blame other groups for our woes? Should we wait feebly for some magic balm to drop from the sky and relieve our stress?

The invitation from the 46th General Chapter⁴ is for us to see our vulnerability with eyes of faith. The capitulants recognized the need to *overcome the vicissitudes of life and creatively respond to the needs of the time*. The search for new pathways arises from the consensus that we simply cannot do more of the same.

If we keep operating as we are used to, we face extinction. Even if we insulate ourselves from the outside world, there is no guarantee that we will remain impenetrable. If we believe ourselves unsinkable because we are big or powerful or influential, we will be relegated to a footnote in history. As early as its preparatory phase, the General Chapter's mandate to *build new paths to transform lives was envisioned to encourage us to live the authenticity of our vocation, communion in diversity, and a solidarity that sustains us in our fragility*. It also invited us to *become aware of our personal and institutional vulnerability...accepting our mistakes and asking forgiveness*.



To be fully human, we need not conceal the cracks and fissures, but instead wear our *broken chevron* with distinction. Lasallians have been using this symbol traced to the coat of arms of the forebears of Jean-Baptiste. Reference is made to the broken bones sustained by Johan Salla in a battle fought for the King of Oviedo; as such, the symbol of the broken chevron has remained with the Lasallian Family worldwide.

We would do well to leverage its profound meaning for us today. Our mortality and human frailty bear the imprint of the Creator. They are for us reminders that the work we do is God's work and that the Institute's legacy must be for God's glory, not ours. From a position of surpassing divine strength, we are invited to face our human mortality, institutional vulnerabilities, and the real threats to our communities and ministries. We are invited to behold the treasure of Jesus contained in earthen vessels *with our own vulnerability, with our limits, with our fragilities, with our own poverty*. As finite creatures made in the image and likeness of the Eternal Father, we can hopefully discover the hidden potency of powerlessness that is part of His winsome design.⁵



What most of us fail to understand...is that vulnerability is also the cradle of the emotions and experiences that we crave... Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, and creativity. It is the source of hope, empathy, accountability, and authenticity. If we want greater clarity in our purpose or deeper or more meaningful spiritual lives, vulnerability is the path.



The Founder was not afraid to abandon himself to God's will. Indeed, St. La Salle trained himself to be indifferent to whatever life circumstances he found himself in. He did so by reminding himself of the presence of God and nurturing a spirit of faith. Like Job (1:21), he entered the mystery of human suffering by immersing himself in the mystery of God: "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised." For De La Salle, it was a daily step by step invitation from a gentle God to grow in grace and virtue.

The New York Times bestselling author Brené Brown spent at least a decade researching the power of vulnerability and provides us with an excellent example of how one grapples constantly with it:



Waking up every day and loving someone who may or may not love us back, whose safety we can't ensure, who may stay in our lives or may leave without a moment's notice, who may be loyal to the day they die or betray us tomorrow — that's vulnerability. Love is uncertain. It's incredibly risky. And loving someone leaves us emotionally exposed. Yes, it's scary and yes, we're open to being hurt, but can you imagine your life without loving or being loved?



Our shared dream of making the world more just and free, greener and kinder, should not tempt us to acquire power or prestige, pressure us to join the rat race, or compete in a winner-take-all world. The mission to build God's reign on earth does not require military might nor logistical capability, neither business acumen nor even ecclesiastical privileges. We should not make the same mistake as the conquistadores of old who were given the papal blessing to claim lands and peoples for Christendom. Pope Francis has this year already renounced the 550-year old Church Doctrine on Discovery, repudiating mindsets, world views, attitudes or actions that reinforce the idea that one group or person is superior to another. The invitation to encounter my brother and sister in the periphery is at the same time a challenge to discover the profound truth about myself, at the very place where the natural ego reigns supreme.

The journey out of corrosive pride begins when we follow the star to Bethlehem, wrestle with our mortality and embrace our fragility. Lying in a manger, we encounter the Word-made-flesh who has assumed our lowly nature and become like us in all things but sin. Here, in the stillness of the night, we begin our pilgrimage from our comfort zones to the sacred space of uncertainty. The first step is a daring leap of faith that leads to radical incarnation. The rest of the path heightens the resolve to totally empty oneself: to let one's ego go and let God be God! In this act of total self-surrender, we attain the fullness of life and experience complete freedom.



What follows are sixteen vignettes I would like to share with you; sixteen sketches to connect us with the experiences and stories of real people, made of flesh, wounded and scarred, risk-takers all. They remain as pilgrims on different trails; none has reached their Promised Land. They grapple daily with imminent fears. They wrestle with God in their nakedness. They live in liminality. Yet they choose to live their humanity fully: **Finite. Fragile. Free.**



01 Weng-Weng

SMALL STEPS TOWARD BIG DREAMS



Many Filipino nicknames are formed by repeating syllables: Jun-Jun, Maimai, Dodo, Jay-Jay, Noynoy, Renren, Tintin.

Some say it's a way

of validating a person's characteristics, such as charm or cuteness. Others say it's a mark of endearment.

Weng-Weng is a popular nickname in these parts, but it is also the name of an innocent-looking yet traitorous red-pink cocktail. Uninitiated tourists are warned not to take a second shot, unless they have pre-booked an ambulance for the night (come to think of it, Weng-Weng sounds like the wailing siren sound from an ambulance).

And for those who came of age in the 1980s, Weng-Weng is also the screen name of a Filipino actor once touted as "the



smallest movie star in cinema history.”

These associations come to mind thinking about a Manila institution, the Hobbit House. After 45 years of serving as a haven for dwarves in the country and in the process raising awareness and

educating Filipinos and Manila tourists on dwarfism, the groundbreaking initiative, sadly, had to close shop:⁶



“Take a table,” the diminutive waiter insists as I lean against the bar. I am greeted by a dwarf wearing a light blue shirt with a logo reading The Hobbit House of Manila.

The empty hall is made up of dark wood that smells of old mothballs. A section of the wall leading to the bar is filled with photographs of famous celebrities posing with staff. There are legendary tales of Marlon Brando mumbling his orders for



drinks at the "Hobbit House" in between shooting days for Coppola's 1979 classic, *Apocalypse Now*.

Whimsical paintings of Hobbits from *The Lord of the Rings* and drawings of green Irish leprechauns adorn the stage. I come to see a friend who is a regular musician at the "Hobbit House". The venue serves as a rite of passage for any live cover band in the city. The Tolkien-inspired spot claims to be the only bar in the world run by little people. It takes pride in being politically incorrect — and for the past four decades it has piqued the curiosity of travelers and locals alike.

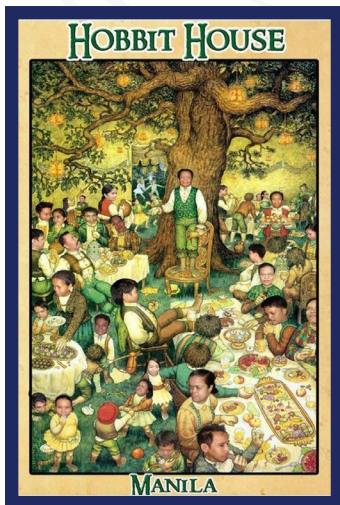
Founded by Jim Turner in 1973, a former Peace Corps Volunteer from Iowa, the Hobbit House has served as a refuge for homeless dwarves escaping the chaotic streets of Manila and the carnivals that exploit them. They are offered decent work as managers, waiters, cashiers and bartenders.

The little people came together as they were aware that they needed strength in numbers and would need to



provide support for each other. There were many local challenges to face: government support was limited to a 20 percent discount on meals, medicines, and transportation; employment opportunities were limited to low-paying jobs since very few had access to quality education; awareness of their issues is limited, statistical data are unavailable or unreliable. And of course discrimination and bullying continue and as many as half of the group have not been officially diagnosed with the medical condition.

Such is the plight of many marginalized groups in the world. They remain nameless and voiceless. Like women and children, widows and orphans in Biblical times, they do not count. And because they are invisible, their rights are pushed aside and there are few government programs to effectively address their needs.



So in 2017, together with 30 other advocates of dwarfism awareness, the group organized and launched Big Dreams for Little People – Philippines Inc. (BDLPP). Funding is always limited as they can only rely on friends and relatives while still building a name for themselves. They also had to deal with the defeatist attitude of so many Little People who have



gotten used to being disadvantaged and have little or no yearning to rise above their present condition. Some allow themselves to be used as objects of amusement and eventually exploited by for-profit groups who justify their ventures as providing opportunities for Little People to be gainfully employed.

Toinkee, their indefatigable leader and founder of BDLPP, will continue to stand up for Little People like herself:



Despite all these struggles and challenges, I am inspired, motivated, and grateful. The network of Little People’s organizations around the world is a channel for our collective effort to fight for our rights and claim our big dreams. We can be the change we want to see. Questions and doubts are never far, but I have learned to understand and accept my condition and consequently, to love myself and people like me.

02 Behind the Scenes

MINISTRARE, “TO ATTEND, TO SERVE”



It was one of those days for a fledgling school administrator. A cashier from the finance office took a leave the Friday before examination week. Being a mission-oriented private school, the school catered to learners from low-income families. It was common to see many students paying at the last minute, just before the deadline.



Reigner had to step in and oversee the cashier transaction himself, as the line of students was getting longer. A student approached the window and paid her tuition in small bills wrapped in a reused plastic bag. He did not have a chance to converse with her, but the sight of all those small bills left him with a barrage of questions long after he had closed the day's transactions.



Did she save part of her daily allowance to pay for her tuition? Did she take on menial jobs here and there to augment her school fees? Did she crack open the piggy bank containing her life savings because her parents could not cough up the required amount at the time?

As the deadline for tuition payments drew near, how many sleepless nights did she spend worrying about where she would source the money to continue her education?

Other encounters take place when one least expects them. One afternoon, the same young administrator dropped by the school canteen for a snack. He made small talk with one of the food servers, who shared the observation that some students would pay for a cup of rice for lunch then ask for sauce drippings from the dishes on display. The cup of rice would cost less than ten US cents. Their lunch fare may not have contained sufficient nutrients but it at least



helped them forget their hunger pangs for the day and get on with their studies.

Several years back, I was working as a public servant in the Philippine Department of Education. By practice, I would make unannounced classroom visits. On one such visit, I chanced upon a girl of around twelve, clearly overaged for a Grade 2 class of seven-year-olds. She was crouched in the corner of a room that did not have access to electricity, and her textbook was almost touching her face as she struggled to read the letters from a book using whatever natural light came through. She was intent on reading the teacher's assigned text but was obviously much challenged.



Before I left that school, I asked the teacher why the student was in a class for seven-year-olds. The teacher explained that she was a slow reader so they assigned her to a class that matched her actual competency level. I thanked her but suggested that she also find a way to get the student assessed by an ophthalmologist. There were no such specialists in that sleepy town, so we had to make arrangements the next day for the student and her mother to visit an eye clinic in the city. We found a donor as well, who was happy to cover the expenses.

Many months later, I received an email from the school's principal. It was a report, informing me that with advice from the clinic, they were able to procure a pair of reading glasses for the student, costing around USD 2.50, and that she was now making much progress in reading. I still find myself teary-



eyed recalling that encounter, awestruck by how a ludicrous amount can go such a long way to transform a person's life.

While some may view the time spent by administrators listening to unofficial concerns of students and staff as “wasted”, these moments can become a rich source of *kairos* experiences — transformative encounters that open up one's mind or heart. Once in a while, these can become experiences that shake us to our roots, the very moment our life's meaning is changed from being an administrator of a modest institution in a far-flung province, to becoming a minister of God's grace, attending to and serving His flock:



Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you... Although I am less than the least of all the Lord's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things (Ephesians 3:2,8-9).

03 Immiscible Discord

CHILDREN OF PEACE,
FROM PAKISTAN TO JERUSALEM

Born and raised in a devout Catholic family from the ancient city of Mariamabad in Pakistan, Br. Waseem's choice of vocation may be considered the fruit of a communal faith deeply rooted in local culture and tradition.

More than just a national shrine for Catholics, Mariamabad attracts millions of devotees including Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs. The rituals and stories woven into this Marian devotion share many parallels with those observed in other Marian shrines around the world. The common denominator may be found in the pilgrims' deep communion with the object of their devotion, in this case with the Mother of God, and their spontaneous expressions of love using local practices and traditions, often without any attempt to conform with official Church liturgies or doctrine. During the annual pilgrimage to this National Shrine in Pakistan, devotees from various faith traditions converge as people of God seeking to connect with the God of many names through the intercession of Mary,



but without the usual walls that institutions and religions construct to separate the faithful from the rest of the unredeemed and unwashed.

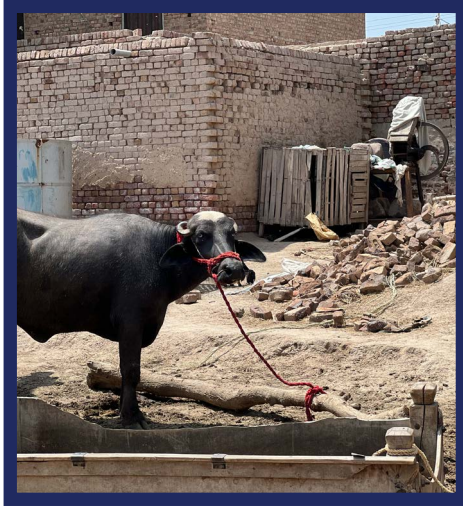


The same warm welcome extended to those from other faith traditions is mirrored at St. Solomon School in Ahmedabad. Br. Waseem currently serves as Principal of this primary school with just under 350 students and 13 teaching staff. The school community is composed of Christian and Muslim learners and teachers sharing the same campus. “I feel blessed to be in this school and thank God for calling me to participate in the mission,” he declares.

Located in one of the city’s poorer sections, St. Solomon School serves the underprivileged and neglected children from struggling families in the area. Their parents are mostly illiterate and cannot qualify for better-paying jobs. Most of the earners in the family can only work as street sweepers or low-income daily wage laborers. While the



majority of students are baptized Christians, the school curriculum from nursery to Grade 7 explicitly promotes the values of peace, harmony, and inclusion.



The tragic incident earlier this year in the city of Jaranwala was met with much regret and sadness by the members of the school community. They decried the mob that burned Christian churches and homes, many of whom were from poor families. In the aftermath of the attack, hundreds of persons were left

homeless and defenseless. The news came as a shock to many ordinary citizens and threatened the fragile peace that existed in many other parts of the country. Threats remain as the Jaranwala incident was not an isolated event; there have been several attacks in other villages in the past against religious minorities, especially Christians. Shrines and churches have been destroyed and vandalized by so-called lightning mobs.

This time around, thankfully, there were many Muslims who came out publicly in support of the persecuted Christians and who stood in solidarity with those who proclaimed peace. At St. Solomon's, Muslim and Christian students came together to raise funds for those who lost houses and



personal belongings. The students and teachers who know poverty and deprivation in their lives contributed generously, giving witness to the school's ideals to promote peace and harmony. It is a lesson worth repeating to many

other generations of Lasallians for years to come.

Visiting our schools in *Proche-Orient* recently, I was welcomed warmly in Jerusalem by representatives from *College des Freres*, who were celebrating 150 years of Lasallian education in this ancient and holy city. I was deeply moved by a student's remarks on the occasion, keeping my hopes alive of the possibility of creating a world where peace reigns in the minds and hearts of men and women— maybe this time around with a little push from children and the young:



Here in Jerusalem, we are not just a school; we are a diverse community where Muslims and Christians live and learn together. This unique coexistence is a testament to the values of unity, respect, and understanding that lie at the core of Lasallian education.



Your presence among us is a symbol of the global Lasallian community's commitment to fostering faith, service, and community. We are excited to have you here, and we look forward to the knowledge and insights you will share with us during your stay.



As we embark on this journey of cultural exchange and shared experiences, we hope your time in Jerusalem will be enlightening and enriching. We invite you to immerse yourself in the diverse traditions and customs of our city, where history, faith, and culture converge in a truly unique way.

Once again, welcome to our Lasallian school in Jerusalem, where we embrace diversity, celebrate unity, and continue the noble mission of providing quality education rooted in compassion and faith.

04 Darkness Descending

LIT UP WITH SMILES

Haiti is a country of exuberant natural beauty, bathed by the blue Caribbean Sea and dotted by rugged mountains, scenic rivers and valleys. The landscape changes rapidly as one travels around the country. Our itinerary included the cities of Cap-Haïtien and Port-de-Paix which are just a little more than 100 kilometers apart.





But the land travel from our port of entry to our home base took us more than ten hours as road conditions were not the best. We had to drive through roads that were mostly unpaved or that needed a fresh layer of concrete, with long stretches that may be traversed only using four-wheel-drive vehicles.

We were excited to visit the Brothers' communities and our Lasallian schools, some of which had been established just a few decades ago by Canadian missionaries. No complaints from us as we had been properly oriented and were psychologically prepared for a long drive. Besides, we had Brother who were excellent drivers, who knew the territory, and had driven across these cities many times. The surprise was that our journey turned out to be a real off-road adventure as we navigated through rocks and sand, dust and gravel, and terrain that featured some complicated passes. At least, everyone was kept awake with a mixture of excitement and anxiety throughout the



trip. Every once in a while, we would chance upon an exotic view of some hidden paradise or an awesome sunset over the sea with a splash of yellow, orange, and red tones gradually fading into deep blue waters.

We were close to an hour's drive to our



host community when several concerned onlookers and passengers from other cars tried to catch our attention, pointing at our front wheel. By the time we decided to stop at the roadside, it was already close to sunset. To our dismay, we discovered that our right front tire was completely flat. We could have easily replaced it with the spare but, just like in the movies, it was stuck under the car and could not be extricated despite many attempts.

It was getting dark and we had to use the lights from our cell phones to get the busted tire vulcanized. We instantly became the center of attention among the residents of the village and in no time numerous children, teenagers, and adults were crowding the vicinity to check on us. They were speaking Creole to each other, making comments and giggling, or simply feeding their curiosity.

It took us a total of two hours before we could get the tire repaired, with a little help from a local who ended up being our mechanic and savior. We had ample time to get cozy with our newfound acquaintances, many of whom had learned to overcome their natural shyness and were already feeling comfortable with us. With a groufie here and there, lots of smiles and fist bumps, barriers were broken and we could now be friends. To our surprise, several of them tried their best to communicate with us with what little French or English or Spanish they knew.

They started asking us about our home countries, but some of them started to also share stories about their families or describe their work and other responsibilities. A number volunteered to do some tasks while the rest seemed eager to help in any way they could.



But what caught our attention the most was the smile on many of the faces of those who came to check on us. In the ever-darkening night in an unfamiliar place, while anxiously waiting for a busted tire to be fixed, their spontaneous and heartfelt smiles were captivating and reassuring. “*Na wè pita*”, they said when we were leaving. “See you later”, we replied in return. We shall indeed meet again in the land of the living and their smiles will get us through this valley of tears.



OE

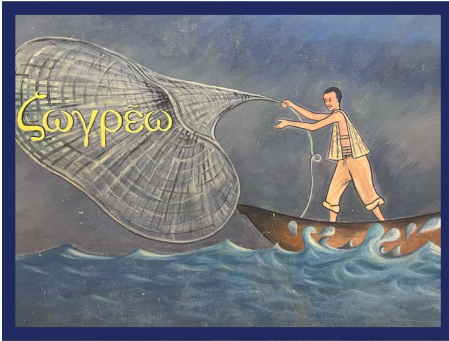
Walk on Water

BY FAITH, ABANDON OURSELVES

★ **He said, ‘Come.’ Peter got out of the boat and began to walk on the water toward Jesus. But when he saw how strong the wind was he became frightened; and, beginning to sink, he cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’ (Mt 14:29-30).**

At times, Peter’s experience seems to be the experience of our institutions: in place of wind and waves, we face declining enrollment, financial hardships, staff turnover, even closures of the local Brothers’ community. Many times it feels like we are just one more school seeking to be relevant.

In the last year, District leaders have reached out with profound concern over the survival of several Lasallian institutions. They find themselves seeking to accompany those in leadership — some who are working tirelessly with creativity and tenacity, and others who are struggling with



how to respond. The dilemmas are deep, for example balancing providing financial resources with saying we cannot do it anymore. These institutions carry legacies, stories, proud

alumni, emotional investment, and historical contributions to the evolution of the Mission. In some cases, they are institutions committed to direct service toward the poor, but it seems the commitment is futile. The waters are churning. “Come.”

What does it mean to step out of the boat in these circumstances? In the memoir many of us are familiar with, Br. Michel Sauvage’s challenging words may provide insight:⁷



The renewal of the service of the poor has inspired a significant number of Brothers to take action, but globally the Institute as such remains an Institute of schools. The passage from schools of the Brothers to schools of the laypeople retains the same viewpoint. There has been no real commitment to this process of returning to the sources, of renewing, of rediscovering what is profoundly our mission. If the



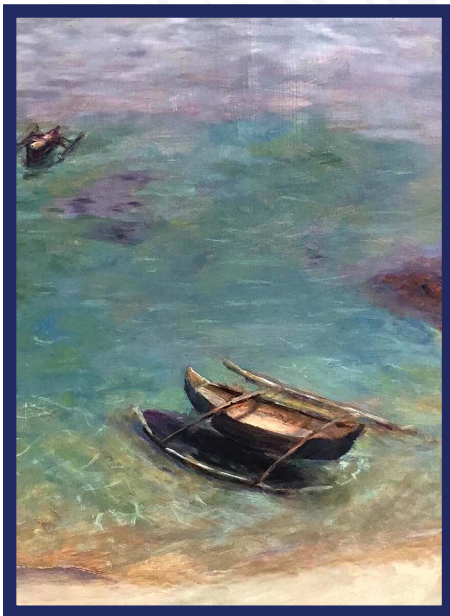
poor and their current needs were truly the starting point today, we would be a totally different Institute. I dream of such an Institute. I think the Lasallian insight has a future and is among those with the best possible future in a renewed Church. What I see presently, however, is an Institute that is physically and materially disappearing as it is. I am not frustrated because the Institute is disappearing; I am frustrated because the people responsible are not fostering the movement.

Has our institutionality paralyzed us? Has it kept us in the boat? The waters churn and we remain in the boat hoping the storm will cease and all will remain intact (admittedly, this is what I prefer!). But perhaps we are being invited into a Peter moment: to take that first step out of the boat that will allow us to encounter the risen Lord inviting us into something new... something different.

This is hard. This is painful. The boat has been our security and stability. Now, the storm persists and so we must ask ourselves: is the greater risk to remain in the boat than to allow ourselves to take that first step into the stormy waters of the unknown, of newness, of responding to Jesus' words: "Take courage, it is I?" Are we being reminded that we are entrusted with a Gospel mission, not with maintaining institutions? "Lord, save me!"



Stepping out of the boat does not guarantee we will have it all figured out. It does not mean we will clearly recognize the new pathway of transformation. It does not mean the institution will be renewed and that the boat will survive. It does not mean the churning waters will cease immediately. Certainly, at times, it will mean having to accompany death so that new life is possible. We too will cry the words of Peter in our own way as we seek to respond to Jesus' invitation. Yet is this Peter moment an invitation to live the words of our Rule (no. 6): "By faith, the Brothers abandon themselves, like their Founder, to God's guidance?"



"Gentle Shore"
13 x 11 Inch Oil
on Paper
Antonio
del Rosario
2020

In the end, perhaps, we will return to the boat. But a boat that will be different because we, too, shall possess new life for those who cry to us today for a Lasallian mission that holds out its hands to the young, the poor, the broken, the marginalized, the abandoned and the suffering, with the same invitation of Jesus: "Come."

Biting the Hand That Feeds

FRAGILITY AND SOLIDARITY

I was then working happily in a well-established Lasallian school in East Asia when the invitation to consider a missionary assignment to South Sudan was made. By no less than the Superior General himself! My immediate response was “yes”. I answered freely. It was a call within a call. I grabbed the golden opportunity because I like venturing into roads untraveled. From a comfort zone to a challenging place is a moment of grace.



The initiative to bring together Church groups to collaborate on a project is not necessarily a well-traveled path. Initiated in 2008, *Solidarity with South Sudan (SSS)* is a pioneering ministry



that brings together congregations with different charisms, religious communities with diocesan ministries, as well as international foundations with local organizations. The center is located in the beautiful town of Yambio in the Western Equatoria State, known for its mangoes, pineapples, and reputedly the best honey in the world. While rich in natural resources, this newly independent country is currently listed at the bottom of every human development index.

In 2019 I joined the community consisting of religious sisters, brothers, and lay missionaries. The members came from seven distinct countries and seven different congregations. Aside from being inter-congregational and international, the community is also *intentional* because there is ample space to live and share each one's unique cultural background and charisma, and to learn about the other's nationality, language, food, religion, sports, and praying styles.





Unlike strangers sharing the same space but who choose to remain unengaged with each other, we take turns cooking different dishes — Peruvian, Indian, Chinese, Polish, African, or Irish. We pray together, share home duties, and try to look out for each other. Appreciation and respect for diverse cultures are embedded not only in our intentional community but also promoted among our teachers and student-teachers. Community life requires great sacrifice as there are differences in personality and professional backgrounds. But when we focus on a common goal and shared mission, love, care, and support take precedence.

Since my arrival, I have become acutely aware of the poverty among people here and the critical role of education in the country's development. Emerging from decades of war, its citizens have to learn to survive through the failing economy, political paralysis, threats to local and national security, and many natural disasters. In this environment, capacity-building for young people may be their only ray of hope for the future. Otherwise, they will likely end up with the ever-familiar stories of young men without jobs, pregnant teenage girls, school dropouts, forced marriages of young girls to much older men, unmarried mothers with increased vulnerabilities, or women in trauma from sexual violence and domestic abuse.

Every student who comes to our college has a heartbreaking story. Former child soldiers. Rape survivors. Children from dysfunctional families. Dependents of families forced to flee. Scarred people all.

Our mission is not just confined to academic excellence. We offer a holistic education that contributes to the



healing of psychological wounds, and life skills training to develop their inborn talents in sports, music & arts, drama, handicrafts, etc.



While we believe we seek to provide our students with the best educational service, we encounter many hurdles in the mission, even resistance, and criticism from those we care for deeply. There seems to be a creeping culture of entitlement that has become a major threat to the sustainability of the project. Since its establishment fifteen years ago, everything has been offered gratis: full board, free textbooks, personal supplies, and plane tickets to and from their home village. Students expect foreign missionaries to have access to unlimited funding for their basic needs. Some easily turn hostile or even violent.

Recently, students, teachers, and workers went on strike for more than two weeks. I have received a warning that a group of students were planning to beat me and the



religious sisters who called for an end to the strike. Despite the fragility of the ministry, we still haven't given up. The threats and insults do not prevent me from joining the company of students on Fridays for their dancing activity. I am convinced they still can grow and be healed from their traumas and chart a new future for themselves. Every little accomplishment is a sign of hope for this fragile country fragmented by diverse languages and tribes.

When I meet a graduate who looks back with gratitude for the life-changing formation she has received at the college, my faith in our educational mission is strengthened. When I witness a young boy able to outgrow his tribal boundaries and ready to meet someone from a different language or culture, my hope is renewed. When a former student comes back to share the story that the old lessons in school can actually contribute to a better life for the family and the local community, my spirits are uplifted. Then I begin to sense the movement from fragility to hope.

07

Red Lipstick

DIGNITY AND RECOVERY IN BEAUTY

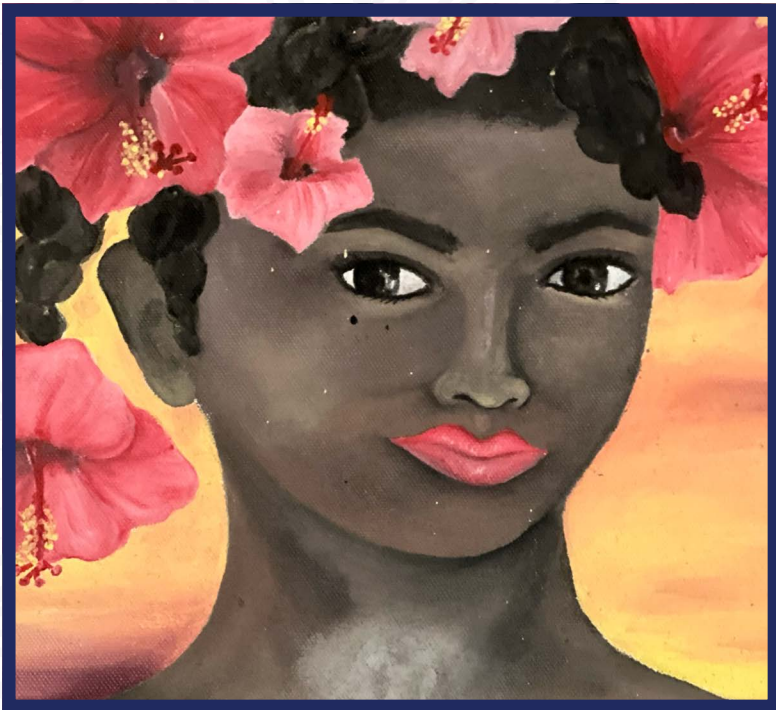
The 2013 supertyphoon Haiyan that devastated five regions in the Philippines wreaked havoc on the educational system there. I happened to still be in government service at that time and, while I witnessed unspeakable suffering in the sector, I was also privileged to encounter heroines and heroes from among our people.

I cannot forget my visit to a school that was completely flattened to the ground. It was there where I met this principal disheveled and wearing unmatched slippers conducting an ocular inspection of her school. She was most grateful that the national government was there on the first week of the disaster. She shared how she lost her family home and all her personal possessions. To lighten our conversation, I kidded her in Filipino, “Ma’am, you seem to have lost everything, but you did not forget to put on your lipstick.”



She looked at me and was very serious as she replied, “But Brother, if I go back to school without a smile and my lipstick on, the students might think we have been so devastated as to not have the strength to rise again.”

I vowed there and then to collect lipsticks from donors after every disaster, for distribution to teachers and social workers in rehabilitation centers. The response from the public was phenomenal as I received more than 123,000 lipsticks for distribution to our teachers heavily affected by the supertyphoon.





A columnist in a local paper reflected on life after the storm and wrote:⁸



“The Department of Education [knows] there is no time to waste and has encouraged teachers to quickly restore normalcy in the lives of displaced children. Gathering the children every day in an improvised covered area, following a semblance of a school schedule, is a crucial beginning for the students who in all likelihood, are still trying to make sense of the disaster that has wrought havoc on their lives. Even the very act of clearing the area with the students is a valuable shared community activity and a step toward normalcy.” Teachers need to be cared for or learn how to make themselves feel good despite the dire situation. What a ray of sunshine a dab of lipstick brings to herself and the world around her.

When I left government service, I worked with a non-government organization and continued the same lipstick appeal as part of our relief pack for those displaced by the frequent calamities experienced annually in the Philippines:⁹



Citing their experience after the devastation of supertyphoon Yolanda, Rey Laguda, executive director of the Philippine Business for Social Progress (PBSP), said providing evacuees with means to restore their dignity and uplift their spirits is important during relief and rehabilitation efforts.

“We can make teachers feel beautiful by giving them lipstick and make-up. Consequently, the smile on their faces can provide hope to the students,” said Laguda, a former official of the Department of Education. “We are appealing for donations of lipstick and make-up for 5,000 teachers and volunteer workers in the front lines of humanitarian work. We hope you can be part of this simple but meaningful gesture of solidarity by providing dignity through beauty,” he added.

A male congregation of Brothers in a hierarchical Church may find it amusing, if not totally irrelevant, to include these feminine beauty and care products as part of a program rebuilding lives. I am blessed to have met many Lasallian women who have changed my perspective of the world and how we may contribute to its healing. Many times, the simplest interventions are the most effective.



I dream of an Institute where women are in full partnership with the Brothers and all our committed Lasallians, working together and by association in support of the Lasallian Mission. May women color the world and revitalize our charism with brightness and joy by

simply being themselves and enhancing our shared mission with the feminine touch.

We remember Jesus' words to the women at the tomb (Mt. 28:10): "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me." Let us not be afraid. Let the voices of Lasallian women proclaim that in Galilee we will find the last, the lost and the least, but also the Lord risen from the grave. Alleluia! Alleluia!

Patriots in Exile

HOPE SPRINGS ETERNAL

Who is responsible for the spilled blood of our brothers and sisters? I have nothing to do with the killings. It must be on somebody else's conscience. Certainly, not on mine. But when no one is to blame, everyone is to blame.

Winter is slowly creeping in here in Europe; I happily sit and watch my kid in a playground and am reminded of how relaxed and beautiful life is. Here's my boy who just turned three, understands three languages, and whose biggest





worry is where to find a new insect he can play with. I love this life and I am thankful every day for it.

Yet moving overseas wasn't part of the original plan. It wasn't a response to an opportunity to seek greener pastures, but an escape and a denial of the ongoing challenges that my home country was facing. It was an effort to leave the despair and the sad reality we were in.

It felt like a long time ago when we were just in the streets of Manila rallying for the countless murders to stop — when churches were ringing their bells simultaneously every day for justice; when politicians and citizens were either removed, jailed, or mocked for holding opposing views. It wasn't so long ago when crowds were laughing as leaders made jokes about rape or used demeaning and derogatory terms against women. It really wasn't long ago when 17-year-old defenseless Kian delos Santos was murdered by police officers during an anti-drug operation while pleading on his knees, "Please don't... I still have an exam tomorrow."

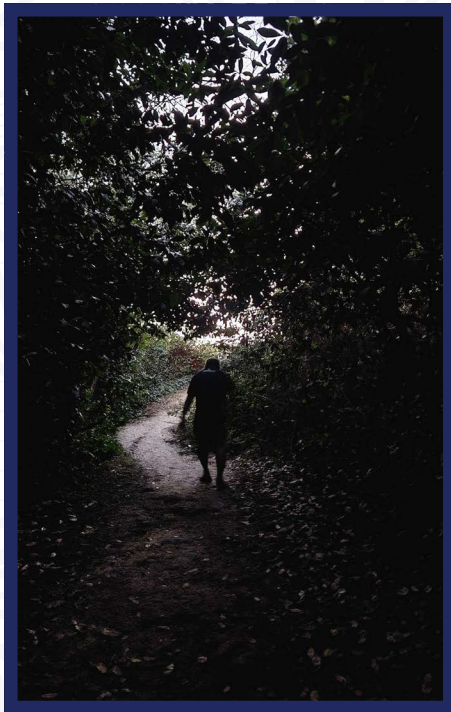


I remember asking leaders of social organizations, businesses, religious institutions, and universities to speak up and to do more. I kept calling mentors and respected leaders asking for solutions and actions we could initiate. While others indeed took action, much of the advice was to keep quiet and to just pray. I was conflicted — not just because I could no longer recognize my own country, but also because I could no longer recognize its people.



At some point, I lost every ounce of hope that things would change.

Hopelessness was never part of my vocabulary. I've always been known by my peers and friends as an optimist and an advocate, having given my best for social and environmental causes. I kept telling myself to hold on. For many years, I was convinced that my future children would no longer know poverty because there would be none in my country. That they would no longer know what a corrupt politician is because there would be none. That I would be part of the solution that made this happen and that we would be the generation to see this change.



However, I felt very alone at that time. The despair was too much. Grief was slowly turning into anger. I had no solution but to leave. The decision wasn't easy. But I knew that I needed to do what was best for myself and my family. It also wasn't just me. There was an exodus of people — who either had the choice or the means to leave — to escape. Some have



been very supportive and have continued to allow us to keep helping the country despite the distance. While others have mocked us, even calling me a “traitor” at one point for seemingly abandoning the good fight. “Patriots in Exile”, as some have called this. But loving one’s country was never about distance or one’s nationality. It was never about how much you’ve given or how much you have served. It is not about the number of rallies you have attended, the taxes you have paid, or the elections you’ve voted in. It is about a deep conviction that will always remain in you, one that always disturbs and nudges you to do something for your country, no matter how simple. It is how you continue to mourn and celebrate, languish and find joy, and fight and love for its betterment. Loving could be abstract and pragmatic for anyone and could also be extended and shared despite one’s circumstances.

I look at my life now and there are so many more things in life that I look forward to. This foreign land is home to my family and me. While my child may not hear of the challenges in our home country now, he will always know of our love for it.

I hear his laugh, his broken Filipino phrases, asking us when the next visit to Manila will be. I look at him and I see so much joy for the future, and that wherever we are, we will continue to love and support our country in whatever way we can.

Indeed, hopelessness was never really part of my vocabulary.



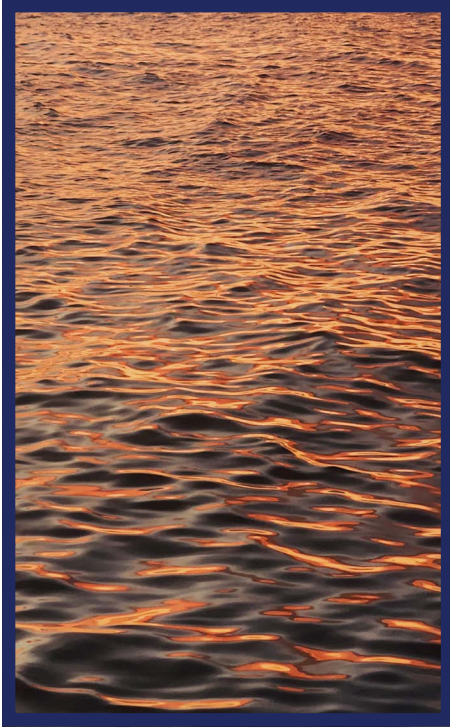
Kiotsuke

SINGLEHEARTED, UNWAVERING, PURPOSEFUL

A dear friend recently got into Brazilian jiu-jitsu (BJJ), the high-contact sport that blends grappling and strategic ground combat. With the ultimate goal of forcing your foe into submission, it may appear like one of those extreme sports dependent on nothing but intimidation and brute force.

But the real enigma of BJJ is its focus on leveraging one's physical capabilities regardless of size or strength, and emphasizing the primacy of method over muscle. Spectators are stunned as they witness how smaller, weaker individuals defend themselves against seemingly impregnable opponents.

The adventure was a novelty, and this BJJ enthusiast must have been so exhilarated that he overexerted and pushed his body beyond its limits. He broke his shoulder, popped a rib, and even busted his knuckles at one point. He must have focused on chokes and locks to bring his opponent to submission and concentrated on the force of his throws and sweeps. Little did he realize that the required physical



endurance needed to be partnered with the development of technical skills, a strong sense of discipline, and adaptation to new situations. The mishap was a blessing in disguise as the experience allowed him not only to test his determination and love for the sport but also to learn the painful lessons of resilience and humility.

But here's the kicker: it wasn't until he finally

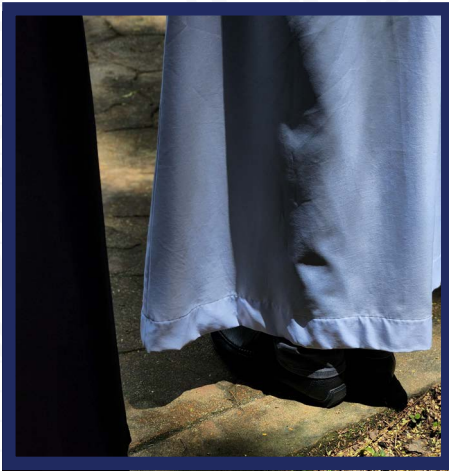
surrendered to the fragility of his body that he started to see real improvement in his gameplay. It taught him that vulnerability and self-care are vital. By admitting his weaknesses and giving his body a breather, he was embracing pain as part of the journey. He needed time and space to heal and recharge.

After all, self-care isn't like joining a luxury cruise; it is about putting on a life jacket to keep oneself afloat. One builds character by drawing on one's inner strength that is developed only by navigating through the bumps and



bruises along the way. That's pretty much what Trisha Elric claimed in *Full Metal Alchemist*, "We may be weak, but we just have to be. If not, we wouldn't have any reason to grow and become strong. And in each step we take, we do become stronger."

Would priests and catechists make more sense to the young if they spoke about their favorite sports instead of preaching about dogma or high theology? Would students learn better if they were coached instead of lectured to? The World Youth Day celebrations are a great occasion to get on the mat and engage the young on their own terms and in their own time.



With a never-give-up attitude, the good news must be preached in season and out of season. A crazy cool sport may be the best way to walk with those who are described as belonging to the loneliest generation. It may be the only way to reach the *hikikomori* — those

young Japanese who suffer from severe social withdrawal. It could be the golden key to grappling with the loneliness epidemic and connecting with GenZers or maybe even Generations Alpha and Beta.



Even a heart emoji can't match a warm hug or a face-to-face encounter. While constantly surrounded by people and being forever connected, many miss out on real-life connections and are just dying to have a heart-to-heart talk. Maybe because he knew that he had more than 50 million followers on social media, Pope Francis issued this friendly reminder on the use of social media and technology during Lent last liturgical year: "Lent is a propitious time to resist temptations and to cultivate instead a more integral form of human communication made up of 'authentic encounters'—face-to-face and in person."



Every jiu-jitsu match begins with the command, "*kiotsuke.*"

The call signals the start of the match and summons the players to gather all their energy for the win. It alerts the players to be forever cautious and vigilant like the watchman who waits for the break of dawn. Or the

hunter waiting patiently for its prey. Or the beloved sitting quietly in joyful anticipation of the arrival of the apple of his eye. It requires singlehearted attention and unwavering commitment but also purposeful action. Do not be afraid. Gather your energy from within your fragile being. We're here for the win.

10

Turbidis Aquis

A CHILD SHALL LEAD US

The *Canal de la Tortue* or Turtle Channel is the water channel that separates Haiti's main island from its northern tip, *Zile Latòti* or Turtle Island, so named because one of its mountains resembles the shape of a turtle. This stretch is navigated daily in both directions by hundreds of people in sailboats built by local artisans who often use repurposed materials for sails and wouldn't bother much with the usual maritime safety standards.



On these boats are transported all kinds of food, merchandise, and other supplies that serve the needs of the inhabitants of *Zile Latòti*, estimated at less than 40,000 a decade ago. The only way to transport



goods and ordinary citizens to and from the main island is via these flimsy boats. People travel unrestricted and fearlessly on these craft without any shade or cover from the sun, rain, or strong winds. If you see lifejackets, they are an optical illusion, but the number of passengers on board is not.

When the first Canadian missionary Brothers arrived in Haiti, they did not choose to establish the Lasallian presence in the large settlements. Instead, they ventured into the peripheries of the peripheries and established a Lasallian educational ministry many decades ago in *Zile Latòti*. What moved them to dive so deep? Was it the wanderlust of adventurers or the radical availability of missionaries? If only we were allowed to have a Zoom meeting with those pioneers. Those were the thoughts that occupied my mind when we jumped into the small boat that was to bring us to the exotic island.



The boat could take in ten people and had enough seats for all of us. The outbound trip left the main island on schedule midmorning, and we coasted along for about one and half hours as we ogled with delight at the different shades of blue of the calm waters and the refreshing breeze in the open sea. But we had to take an afternoon trip for our return. This time around it was so much longer as we were sailing against the wind and the sea was a bit



too turbulent for comfort. We had to take in a few more passengers and the clouds were threatening with heavy rain. Our boat swayed from side to side almost from the time we departed *Zile Latòti* with big splashes threatening to soak our backpacks or fill the bottom of our craft.

As we kept our heads bowed low and our bodies wrapped in waterproof vests while holding on to our bags to keep them from touching the vessel floor, lo and behold, there was Jean Pierre, a boy of about 12, sitting serenely on the side of the boat without any trace of fear or anxiety. He was the assistant navigator and our boatman's all-around mess boy. He would be on the lookout for big rocks or logs blocking our route ahead and immediately communicate with hand signals to our captain to prevent any untoward incidents.

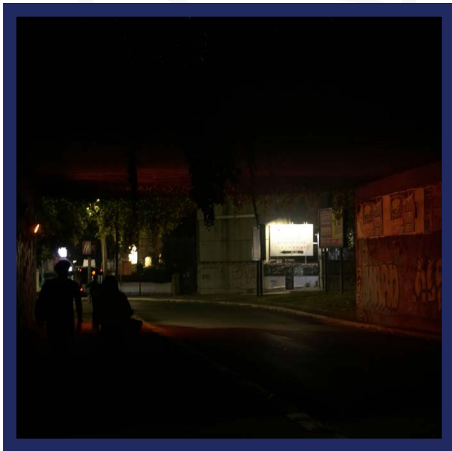
Jean Pierre impressed us not only with his dependable maritime skills and his ability to communicate wordlessly with the boat captain but also his composure and confidence to remain totally calm and unperturbed throughout the trip. He sat on the edge of the boat, staring out to sea, fully concentrated on his responsibility. Not even the strongest jolt would unnerve him.

We would look at Jean Pierre every now and then to reassure ourselves that there was nothing to worry about. His inner sense of tranquility amid the turbulence around provided a comforting presence every time we remembered we were still miles away from a safe harbor.

11 Atychiphobia

LONG DARK NIGHTS

Finite. After two-and-a-half years of lockdown, I have recently emerged from what professional psychologists and psychiatrists refer to as a “long dark night of the soul.” If there was something the pandemic taught us, it was the fact that depression is real. And depression can hit anybody, even the most seemingly emotionally and spiritually strong individuals.



A lot of lay, non-religious people think that consecrated religious persons like us cannot possibly be affected by problems of the world because we are “closer to God”! On the contrary, experience



tells me that the struggle occurs every day. Like any ordinary person, we face daily the prospect of valuing what the world values, and necessarily, the expectations that come with those values — be it efficiency, effectiveness, or the successful completion of tasks.

And so, in being afflicted by the human condition and the expectations of the world, I felt driven to “perform” to the rhythms of the world, dragged into the rat race I so wanted to avoid. In the end, my own “success” was my undoing as it came at a high cost to my human relationships, whether in the familial or collegial realms. I often mused, in those times at prayer, that perhaps had we applied the world’s notion of success to the short life of Jesus, He may well have been labeled a failure. And yet, as often happens, we rejoin the rat race of life as soon as we come out of those chapel doors.

We are not bad men per se either, deliberately fooling ourselves at prayer. No, we are merely conditioned by years of hearing, playing, and dancing to the tune. Mostly, we just become who we have been taught to be.

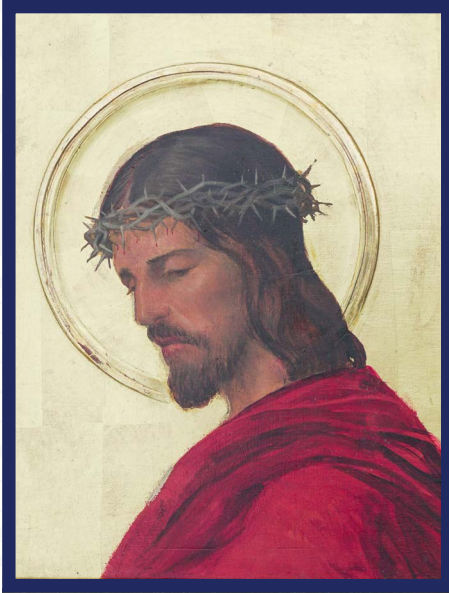
And if one is like me who grew up equating perfection at tasks and being top of the class always, with being wanted, with being loved — and this spells more trouble — because the truth is: we can never be perfect, as mere finite beings. Here was a boy who, more than anything, just wanted to be accepted for who he is and to be loved as such — not for what he could do or accomplish. These fragile dynamics, kept well hidden behind years of success at school as a student and later at the workplace as a Brother, would soon unravel.



Fragile. I learned how to work independently to take care of myself even as a child, and to get things done because there wasn't anyone to depend upon. I learned to bring that sense and attitude, too, into school in undertaking assignments and completing what was required. That brought approval and being liked. And there was the issue of being compared to other kids — or rather, comparing myself with other kids. You made do with what you had because many times, the resources that are available to other children my age were not available to me. Coming from a big family where, many times, meager resources were allocated to the more important necessities, one needed to be better at other things — academic pursuits provided that differentiation.

But those limitations also taught me good things. I learned to live contentedly. While we were not poor in the real sense of the word, I grew up with the attitude that we were, and so I learned self-reliance, frugality, resourcefulness, and contentment. Even as my older siblings finished school and eventually obtained work and moved out of the house and I was getting a taste of the things that they did not have, I still lived simply, and if I needed something extra special, I had to save more to get it myself. From the outside, I looked like a strong person, independent, self-directed, and always seeking good. But deep down was a person who always sought external approval, who feared failure, and who'd be driven at all costs to perfectionism and to avoid failure.

The motivation to succeed and to help others was fueled more by a determined goal not to fail, nor to be seen as a failure, rather than driven by altruism. That same inner working and motivation could easily be carried over to



one's life as a Brother. Perhaps, even the whole life of being a Brother was rather hinged on this desire for approval and avoidance of failure that was planted early in life. And that fragile thread itself was a recipe for an unsustainable life and it eventually came to the fore in the work and one's relationships.

Free. And so, it came to the fore and the unraveling was devastating. At the point of midlife and amidst the heavy pressures of running a school at the height of the pandemic (with some people relying on you to save them or their loved ones) the pressure simply overwhelmed: that veneer of cool calm strength lived undisturbed over the years. When things do not go the way they ought to or should, the ugly specter of becoming a failure in one's own eyes and the thought of being one in front of others became an unbearable prospect. A crisis was created, not so much by what others did, but by the years that the little boy within lived in fear of being a failure — equating such with the loss of approval, love, and the desire to be seen as good, and therefore, wanted.



But, in the classic sense of what St. John of the Cross describes in his treatise *Noche Oscura* as “a long dark night of the soul,” the real close encounter with the God who first accepts, loves, and calls by name acquires ever greater meaning! Crisis, in this sense, was the great big opportunity to know ourselves as God knows us, and so, we can “let go” of the shackles which hinder us from loving completely like Him. The crisis of self-worth, self-identity, and meaning opened the opportunity to know the Truth about ourselves, about the world, about human nature, and the meaning of our own lives. More importantly, in faith, it allowed me to see with God’s own eyes who I was to Him: that I am His “Beloved” and like our Brother Jesus who showed us the way, I am His disciple, “in whom He is well pleased!”

10 Them/Us

TRUTH, LOVE, AND BLURRED LINES

“Is it a girl or a boy?” At sixteen weeks pregnant, this question is simple enough. For now.



As of 2022, there are as many as twenty-five (25) sexual identities dotting the spectrum. The biological sex of a person is based on their chromosomes, genitalia and other born factors. Gender though refers to a person's expression



and can be any of the 25 current options. Sexual orientation, meanwhile, refers to the individual one is attracted to, or not. And lastly, there's the romantic orientation, which identifies which individual a person is romantically involved with, regardless of their sexual orientation.

It's a dizzying array. And while gender identities are valid, one cannot help but worry how much of it is also an influence of the environment.

Identity crises are part and parcel of growing up. And while it's already a confusing time, the sheer volume of stimuli also from mass media, social media and the internet can create quite the anxiety for the parent. Parents are rightly concerned that the already confusing time that is puberty can be aggravated by all of these new norms.

I'd like to think that I'm a fairly liberal person. I count members of the LGBTQ+ community as some of my dearest friends. One of them is a fully transitioned transwoman with whom I feel like I've already been friends in a past life. I have a gay best friend who was my Man of Honor at my wedding. I was there for him when he came out in his early 20s and have always been the big sister who accepted him, unlike his flesh and blood sibling who rejected him at first. And I am in close friendship with gays and lesbians and empathize with their struggles.

In my home country, being LGBTQ+ is not a deterrent to employment. In fact, I also have seen multiple friends rise to the highest ranks of technology, FMCG (fast-moving consumer goods), and of course, fashion and entertainment. Our society is relatively accepting and while



there have been isolated incidents of harm against the community, by and large, against the rest of the world, here they have less fear and more safety. However, there are reality checks still.

My lesbian friends shared to me their problems finding a reputable school for their son as he was about to enter elementary. Apparently, certain academic institutions still demand a marriage license as one of the perquisites for a child's enrollment. My transwoman friend has no problems with employment but has a quiet struggle being able to travel abroad. What one might think of as basic, inalienable rights like traveling, knowing which bathroom to use, become very serious navigations and negotiations when one is in the trans-spectrum.

And then of course with my baby, what worries I might not have for my friends whom I know can ably handle themselves, can be very real.

I have very heteronormative in-laws. I trace my ancestry to a country, where as recently as this year, has legally allowed same-sex civil unions but not the full rights of a married heterosexual couple. Seen through this lens, I suddenly realize how many difficulties and obstacles are traversed by members of their community. And all this has tested my sense of allyship and made me understand how much deeper their problems and issues run.

One scenario is enough to make one lose sleep. So, I return to this: only the truth. If it is their truth, so be it. Pregnancy, I have come to discover, is a truly full surrender to fragility. To feel life inside me and to have the immense



responsibility of nurturing it can bog the rational mind. This can only be a miracle; this can only be further proof of God, and this can only be a creation of the divine.



As much as I love my science lessons and have binge-watched all manner of YouTube videos on conception and pregnancy, my prevailing conclusion is still that this spark of life can only have come from something greater. I pray that my child will have a strong sense of self and that I will be wise and generous enough as a parent to be able to cultivate it. I know that I will parent at a time when there are constant contractions from social media, where the edge is constantly being pushed and yet also where lines are blurred.



Thus, my final prayer and answer is love. During my difficult childhood, this was the one truth that anchored me across those storms. It was this truth that healed me enough to grow up evolved to stop the generational trauma but also hopefully not too hardened to become a loving and giving parent. There is only ever love and my wish is that my child will never want of it from either me or the world.

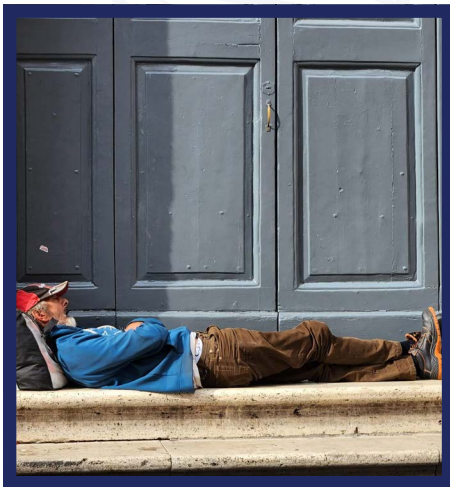
The Absence of Presence

EVIDENCE OF THINGS NOT SEEN

Growing up in a dysfunctional family, I slowly understood that I was on my own in facing the different challenges life threw at me. These challenges became part of what built me into who I am today.

Admittedly, I can compare the experiences of others to mine

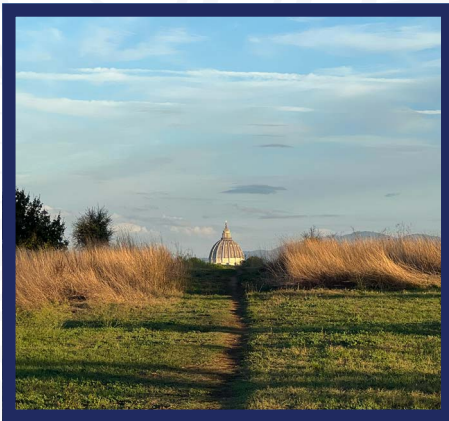
and am continually intrigued by the factors that shape us as people. What has been absent in my life may very well be present in theirs. This doesn't necessarily mean that they are better off just because I had something lacking in my life; it just means a totally different experience.





The value of the absence of presence is, more often than not, overlooked. Most people would feel empty with the idea of things being absent in their lives. But as we make our way through life, the absence of someone or something can also evoke a sense of longing and appreciation. When we don't have the constant presence of loved ones, we realize the depth of their impact and the significance of their role in our lives. The absence of certain elements can foster a newfound sense of awareness and gratitude; when we lack access to the conveniences and luxuries that we often take for granted, we develop a deeper appreciation for the little things that bring joy and comfort to our lives. The absence of material things highlights the resilience of the human spirit and encourages us to find contentment in simplicity and authenticity.

Ultimately, the absence of presence encourages us to embrace the ebb and flow of life, acknowledging that change and impermanence are intrinsic aspects of the human experience. It is this thought that made me ponder over my faith in God and the Church.



Throughout my childhood and into my adult life, I've been in close proximity to the Church, its practices, mission — and yes, its faults. When someone asks what religion I subscribe to, I jokingly reply, "Catholic by convenience". A small



part of me feels disheartened whenever I say that, but it does hold true. I'm Catholic because everyone around me is, and there really isn't any upside to exploring other religions because I assume it will still feel the same — someone old trying to preach something in the pulpit that I can't relate to.

Losing my faith has been a deeply personal struggle, one that many millennials seem to share. Growing up in a world where everything is at our fingertips, where evidence and proof are demanded for every belief, I find myself grappling with the intangibility and relevance of faith. The Church, once a central pillar in my life, now feels distant, its teachings often conflicting with the practical realities I encounter daily. This disconnect has left me and many others in my generation feeling adrift, searching for something concrete to hold onto amidst the uncertainties of life.

It's hard to believe, but even now, as I navigate the complexities of faith and the challenges of our fragile world, I find myself questioning the authenticity of the Church and its leaders. The scandals, the controversies, and the lack of transparency have eroded the trust I once had in the institution. It's disheartening to witness the disconnect between the spiritual teachings and the actions of those meant to uphold them. The struggle to reconcile my beliefs with the actions of the Church has left me feeling disillusioned and lost, wondering if there is a place for me within the framework of organized religion.

The disconnect between the tangible and intangible aspects of faith has made it increasingly challenging for my generation to find solace and meaning within the Church.



The reliance on material evidence and visible proof often overshadows the importance of spiritual nourishment and introspection. The teachings of the Church, once a source of comfort and

guidance, now seem abstract and distant, unable to provide the concrete answers that my generation seeks in a fast-paced and ever-changing world.

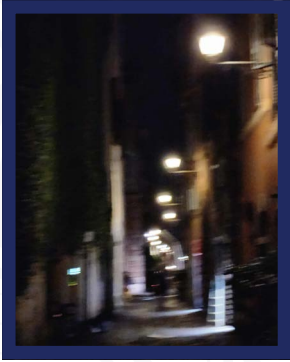
In the face of these challenges, I still am firm with the values that I've learned through the teachings of the Church and the sense of accountability I feel for others, especially those who are in most need. I still believe that there are opportunities to understand the future directions of the Church and how it can engage the younger generation to be more involved with its mission. But to do that, admittedly, I have more questions than answers — I often find myself pondering some of these fundamental questions: How can I reconcile the teachings of the Church with the realities of the world? How can I trust an institution that seems to contradict its principles? As I grapple with these questions, I'm reminded that the journey of faith is deeply personal, filled with uncertainties and complexities that require introspection, honesty, and a willingness to seek answers beyond the confines of the visible world. It is clear that while the Church may be absent in my life, I find solace in the presence of _____.

14

Dry Season

THEY ARE NEW EVERY MORNING

- ★ **I struggle to keep up.**
- I am not good at this.**
- I am bound to fail.**
- I do not deserve to be here.**
- I drag people down.**
- I am threatened.**
- I cannot do it.**
- Maybe it is for the best if I quit.**



In many instances, these thoughts run through my mind as I stare at the blank document on my monitor. I'm trying to write my dissertation. My thoughts take over, like manipulative creatures — so powerful, they exhaust my energy, leaving me vulnerable. I need to breathe. I need to get away with what triggers my anxiety.

I leave my desk and listen to some Linkin Park songs; do other things and convince myself I am doing something productive. Time passes by quickly. I return to my desk. I drag myself to write one, two or three sentences but I still end up with a blank manuscript.

In my idleness, I build resistance. Like a rebel, I do other things except what is needed to be done. The thoughts cycle again and again: “research is not for you”, and I start dreading my dissertation. I associate it with negative things and failure. At the last stretch trying to obtain the degree, I am having doubts. I am slowly losing the drive to move forward. I deliberately reject it, procrastinate and find ways to break free.



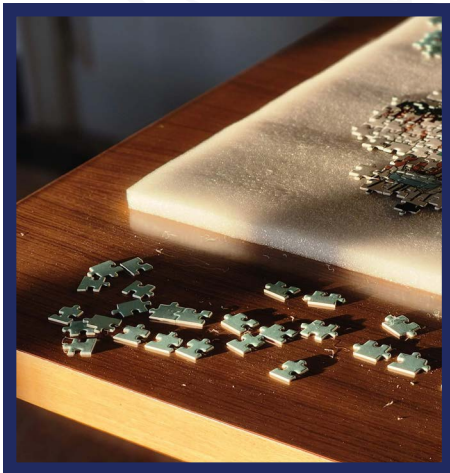
Hours of nothingness turn into days. I am in a slump. I start to question my life, my purpose and my value as an individual. I am imprisoned by



my worries, fears and frustrations. My unhealed wounds and insecurities surface. I live in guilt and shame. In my solitude, I weep in hopelessness. I am so broken. What should I do?

In my desperation, I call on God. I cannot do it alone. I need Him. I pray for wisdom, strength and guidance. I ask that He make my path straight. He answers through the people I talk to and the circumstances I encounter day by day. I am blessed to be surrounded by people of faith who help me form godly thoughts and live a Christ-like life.

I can choose to give in and end my suffering, but God has put me in this situation. I am wandering in the wilderness, like the Israelites who wandered in the desert towards the Promised Land. In this period of loneliness and despair, I long for God. In this season of waiting, I am holding on to His promises. I take courage knowing that He is with me, fighting for me.



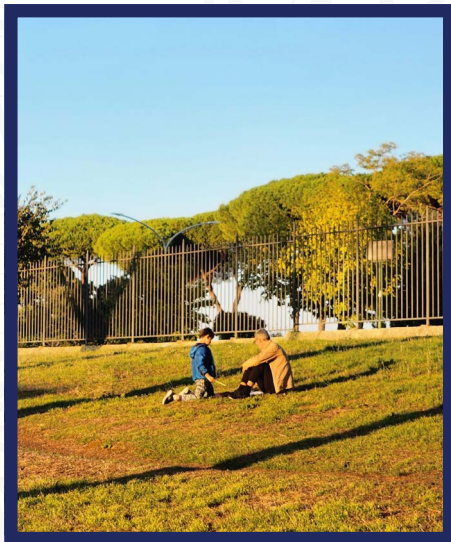
God knows how stubborn I am, yet I am still here. It is difficult to let go of vanity, to humble one's self and to surrender but God has His ways of reminding me that He is in control, not my thoughts and not my feelings.



The only one I can trust is His voice — the truth and wisdom in His words.

I am a work in progress. I still find myself overthinking and worrying at times, but I have learned to pray to God about them and wait patiently. When I am down and weary, I read Lamentations 3:16-33 and I am specially drawn to verses 22-24: “The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. ‘The Lord is my portion,’ says my soul, ‘therefore I will hope in him.’”

My journey is becoming more about God and less about myself. He brings calmness and joy in my suffering. He carries my burden and frees me from pain. His overflowing love and mercy sustain me. I do not deserve His faithfulness, yet He stays.



By His grace, I am moving one day at a time. I have miraculously progressed. I still have a lot of things to do to reach the finish line but having written something in my manuscript is a victory. I give all the credit and glory to God. He is at work. I have thought of quitting my Ph.D.



many times. But unless God says it is over, my journey continues. At the moment, I still do not know whether I will finish my dissertation or not. I still do not understand why certain things happen in my life. I still do not know what the future holds. But wherever God takes me, I will follow Him. In my journal, I recently wrote: “Lord, Your timing is always right. Your plans are bigger than mine. I trust You. Your will be done. In everything, I give you praise. In everything, I give you thanks.”

15 Senior Moment

EMBRACED BY THE VASTNESS

I did not get much direct feedback on the previous year's Institute Pastoral Letter, so this email message from a wise one came as a very pleasant surprise and one that I read with much delight:



As a senior Brother, I was taken by one particular paragraph in your letter, *Lasallian Stories on the Road*. Every word except the last sentence struck home for me ever since reading it last January. Recently, I used it at our Community Annual Program to express to my fellow Lasallian mates a significant personal learning in my life. Your words touched me deeply and sparked in me a response I call surrender. It is far from giving up or just complaining. In many ways, it borders



on resurrection. I apologized to my community for writing down my thoughts. I feared that emotions would get in my way if I tried to do otherwise. Avoiding the sadness of your last sentence is one of the main reasons I have undertaken a book project on the significance of retirement.



He was referring to this section of my 2022 Pastoral Letter:

“We experience these little losses and deaths many times over. When an initiative is swept aside by the next administration. When a dear friend and brother chooses to leave the congregation. When

an innovation in which I am invested has not passed the board’s approval. When my youthful, idealistic plans are dismissed by my superiors as not worth the risk. When what I have expended almost all of my energies in does not seem to be appreciated by the District. When in my retirement years, I have this nagging feeling not only that I have nothing but also that I am nobody.”

He looks back at this life and realizes that his creative instincts have often led to an experience of personal losses, frustrations, and hurts from the very community of Brothers he has vowed to live and work with all his life. On the other hand, he also acknowledges that his creative instincts on the Lasallian Mission have led to many positive experiences of personal and communal successes. Since then, he feels he is near a personal synthesis of this segment of his life's journey and, though it is still work in progress, he feels confident enough to share his three steps to personal creative health —





He considers the virtue of surrender as a necessary ingredient to managing Step 2. In order not to kill his creativity, he knows he needs to surrender and embrace the pushback he is experiencing so he can move to Step 3 and begin the new arising. More than just strategies to cope with disappointment and frustration, there is certainly something holy in each step and in all three segments of this chapter in our lives.

It may seem a bit early for me to think or speak openly about my own retirement plans. However, my recent visits to a few of our retirement and nursing communities have helped me appreciate the value of our Senior Brothers to the Institute and the Lasallian Mission, especially today.

Paul Weinfield describes what it means to let the hero die. I quote him extensively below as his insights speak not only to the young once but also the young ones:¹⁰



Leonard Cohen said his teacher once told him that, the older you get, the lonelier you become, and the deeper the love you need. This is because, as we go through life, we tend to over-identify with being the hero of our stories.



This hero isn't exactly having fun: he's getting kicked around, humiliated, and disgraced. But if we can let go of identifying with him, we can find our rightful place in the universe, and a love more satisfying than any we've ever known.

People constantly throw around the term "hero's journey" without having any idea what it really means. Everyone from CEOs to wellness-influencers thinks the hero's journey means facing your fears, slaying a dragon, and gaining 25k followers on Instagram. But that's not the real hero's journey.

In the real hero's journey, the dragon slays YOU... If you are foolish, this is where you will abort the journey and start another, and another, abusing your heart over and over for the brief illusion of winning. But if you are wise, you will let yourself be shattered, and return to the village, humbled, but with a newfound sense that you don't have to identify with the part of you that needs to win, needs



to be recognized, needs to know. This is where your transcendent life begins.

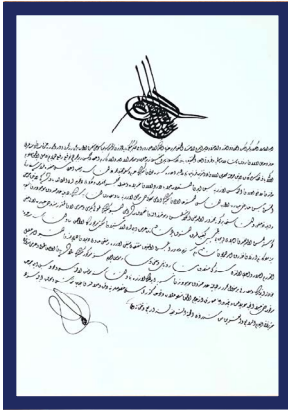
So, embrace humility in everything. Life isn't out to get you, nor are your struggles your fault. Every defeat is just an angel, tugging at your sleeve, telling you that you don't have to keep banging your head against the wall. Leave that striver there, trapped in his lonely ambitions. Just walk away, and life in its vastness will embrace you.

150 War and Peace

FIFTEEN DECADES OF LASALLIAN PRESENCE

As I was writing this year's Pastoral Letter, my thoughts were redirected to the intensifying tension in the Holy Land sparked anew by the recent explosion of violence. My visit to the sector was scheduled in time for the Golden Jubilee celebration of Bethlehem University but was also an opportune moment to visit our ministries and meet the Brothers and Lasallians from Jerusalem, Beit Hanina, Jaffa, and Bethlehem.

Three days after my plane left Tel Aviv, the Hamas attack was launched. Because the names and faces of those I met recently in that providential visit are still fresh in my memory, I feel even more closely united with all the women and men of goodwill who have been longing for that ever-elusive gift of peace from the Christ-child born in Bethlehem. I fear the ongoing attacks and counter attacks because I know some of those whose lives are in danger. They are brother and sister and son and daughter and mother and father and friend to me.



Our Lasallian presence in the Holy Land started fifteen decades ago and is intimately interwoven with the centuries-old history of the struggles of generations of peoples and families in the homeland of Jesus. I was awed when I saw a digital copy of the original permit to open our school in Jaffa handwritten in Turkish and granted during the reign of the Ottoman Empire.

Our very presence in the communities and ministries of the Holy Land is of great value to the Institute as it seeks to understand better and become more responsive to the profound desires of peoples from diverse cultures and beliefs to try to live in peace and build an inclusive world of justice. I was deeply moved as I listened to the stories and reflections shared by our students, teachers, and parents: daily experiences of oppression, inequity, and harassment from those who wielded authority. Silence and attentive listening

were the only appropriate response to their narration of unyielding courage amid the harsh realities that have become normal in those parts.



When Pope Francis met young people in Manila in 2015, a young girl asked him a heartfelt question, “Many children have been abandoned by their parents, some have fallen victims to evil things...



Why does God allow such things to happen to children? And why are there only a few people who help us?"

I felt a lump in my throat when a young student shared recently about his daily experiences as a Palestinian taking the train to and from school:



We would get searched for simply talking too loud, or be scrutinized for having my hands in my pockets, or wearing any Palestine-supporting accessories, or even just being a Palestinian who could be a potential threat to the Zionist occupation... I have faced public humiliation, physical assaults, and insults, simply for being a Palestinian using the train. I've even been arrested for carrying my school bag, which bears the Palestinian map, and then subjected to physical violence, including being pepper-sprayed.

When I met a group of missionary Brothers assigned to the *Terra Santa*, I had my own set of questions to ask: What grace have you received which gave you the courage to make yourselves radically available to serve in this sector? What insights on hope have you gained from the decades of engaging in ministries that continue to be fragile for years to come? How would our ministry of presence in these areas of conflict cause the dough of lethargy and skepticism to rise? Their individual and collective response



to those questions provide the Institute with essential guideposts as we embark on the Leavening Project. Their witness of their lives and power of their convictions will serve as wellsprings of strength and wisdom for all Brothers and Lasallians in the world.

When a US senator agitates military forces to level the Gaza strip, knowing that there are two million inhabitants in that “place”, then the act is really an incitement to genocide. New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof disagrees with the legislator: “I shouldn’t have to remind a senator that when you care about some humans but not others, you’ve lost your humanity... War crimes shouldn’t be avenged by more war crimes.”¹¹

Israeli reservist Nir Avishai Cohen, writing his reflections while on board the plane from the US that would bring him to the battle lines, shares his views:¹²



This war, like others before it, will end sooner or later. I am not sure I will come back from it alive, but I do know that a minute after the war is over, both Israelis and Palestinians will have to reckon with the leaders who led them to this moment. We must wake up and not let the extremists rule...



I try to look for shreds of hope... At the end, after all of the dead Israelis and Palestinians are buried, after we have finished washing away the rivers of blood, the people who share a home in this land will have to understand that there is no other choice but to follow the path of peace. That is where true victory lies.



Worm's Eye View 2023





An imposing edifice in the Eternal City like our Casa Generalizia draws us to the equally prominent affairs that are appropriately celebrated in its hallowed halls. And one just needs to navigate through the maze of its corridors today to gape at a few memorabilia of those milestones and historic occasions celebrated in the presence of eminent persons.

The Institute Archives are a veritable treasure trove of many more documents and artifacts that bring back memories of once-in-a-lifetime photo opportunities in via Aurelia. A visit to our Santuario De La Salle brings back to life numerous Lasallian commemorative celebrations of the past century and a half. One may spend some quiet time in our Aula Magna and glance at the gallery of portraits of our esteemed past Superiors General to get a feel of the assemblies and chapters that we now acknowledge as defining moments for the Institute. Walk around the orchard within the compound and discover stone markings on trees planted to mark some of those not-to-be-forgotten gatherings for the Lasallian Family.

But how does one capture the many other best-kept secrets of an Institute so richly blessed with superheroes sans capes, wingless angels, sages without portfolios? They are our ordinary Lasallians who wrestle with our Everyday God. Most of them have remained obscure and unnamed. This year the Casa Generalizia community bid our goodbyes to a true and faithful Lasallian who has served us for more than four decades. True to form, Abramo slipped out quietly from our midst during the summer holidays, when no one was looking.

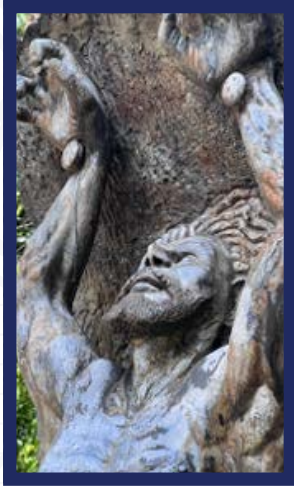


We mourn the loss of a person who has become an institution at the Casa Generalizia. No, Abramo did not occupy a position of prestige or power, and neither did he possess extraordinary expertise. But for many who have worked in Rome or attended a few

sessions or even just visited for a couple of days, Abramo was the human face of warm hospitality, joyful service, and cheerful giving. Anyone who visited his office, even if it was for the first time, would meet the kindest soul ready to drop everything to attend to you with a most welcoming smile and a cheerful heart. Anyone who came in as a stranger to his office left befriended and beguiled.

Mary Fox describes his impact on her: “I feel so blessed to have worked with him over so many visits... No favor was ever too much, no shipping too tricky, no order too difficult. What an incredible man; he graced us all with his goodness.”

Abramo’s life story of his journey as a refugee from Eritrea is known to many and is already filled with many anecdotes that celebrate the triumph of the human spirit. But the transforming power of the Father’s love cannot be lost in the humble narrative of this displaced person from a small nation who made movers and shakers and other people-on-



the-move feel very much at home in via Aurelia. Today, we choose to remember him with much gratitude and fraternal love for, indeed, what we choose to keep alive in the memory of our hearts defines our world. Every time we remember Abramo's kindness and good deeds, we receive again an abundant dose of God's special love for those who continue to believe that God's reign is here among us.

We are filled with a similar experience of God's overflowing love when we encounter our sisters and brothers at the peripheries. In the barrenness and aridity of the desert we discover wellsprings of hope and joy and love in abundance. As Br. Anthony Rogers has discovered:¹³



When we dare to get closer to those in pain and anguish, we will begin to discover persons behind the persona. Their stories will become the good news for our ears turning our emptiness into encounters with Divine Compassion. Listening to them is the path to our conversion.

When their stories of shame and embarrassment allow us to grow in our conviction that desolation and



**wretchedness,
hopelessness
and gloom,
despondency
and disdain,
even for the
self is not the
plan of the
Divine for
humanity, their**

tears become our saving water to wipe away the dust from our eyes. We in the process can also learn to cry with the God of Compassion for the children so dear to God's Heart. We will have the courage to turn their tears of sorrow into tears of joy. We can walk with them along the path to self-confidence and a new consciousness to the shelters we will create as their new home in our land.

May God's reign of "justice and peace and the joy of the Holy Spirit" be embodied — radically incarnated — in a sensory experience?

Together with Brs. Paco and Sergio, I was recently introduced to the gastronomic delight familiar to every Haitian. During our second day of visiting *Zille Latoti* or Turtle Island for tourists, we partook of *soup journal*, a warm stew of squash, potatoes, vegetables, goat meat



and local herbs and spices. This soup of independence is traditionally served at the Haitian family table on January 1 to celebrate New Year but also to commemorate the nation's independence in 1804, the first Caribbean nation to break free from the shackles of their colonizers. "Freedom in every bowl," is how Fred Raphael, a famous New York-based Haitian chef, refers to this dish that made it to UNESCO's intangible cultural heritage list. Prepared by slaves for their plantation masters, Haitians were barred from partaking of this delicacy just like the many other restrictions that reinforced the supremacy of their white colonizers. Sadly, after Haiti's independence, many other European nations shunned this first free Black republic, maybe as a knee-jerk protectionist stance to save their slave colonies.¹⁴

Might we instead sit at the table of solidarity with all those who hunger and thirst for justice, freedom and peace? I was privileged to join a group of young Lasallian volunteers serving the poor and homeless in La Granja, Santiago de Chile. Comedor Solidario has been serving hot meals every weekday at noontime in a hall at a corner of





Colegio San Gregorio de La Salle for more than a decade now. No questions are asked from the guests, and all are welcome at the table of joy. Each visitor is seated and given a generous serving of a hot dish with maybe an additional take home pack on Fridays before the facility takes a rest for the weekend. I joined them for a piatto of perfectly prepared al dente pasta, bread and fruits. As one can never predict how many walk-ins will come for lunch, I asked the volunteers how they handle those who may come in after the day's supply runs out. Surprisingly, there has never been a day without food to go for anyone who comes. The multiplication of loaves happens today before the very eyes of those who love enough and therefore dare believe.

Bernard Hours highlights the critical importance of seeing with the eyes of faith in order to advance the Lasallian Mission: “the spirit of faith was the core dynamic of the life that Jean-Baptiste endeavored to build for himself and for the Brothers. It dictated the tone of Lasallian spirituality, which was essentially ascetic.”¹⁵ When one dares to embrace the misery of the other, then there is an awakening to the power of the cross. When there is no magic solution to ease my brother's pain, the spirit of faith invites me to live



the unanswered questions so I may ponder in my heart the existential mystery behind those questions.

Just three days before the Hamas attack in October, I listened attentively to the experience of a student terrorized by paranoid authorities:



I believe I can speak for the majority of students at this school when I say that the train is the primary mode of transportation for us to reach our school. Today, I want to share my daily experiences as a Palestinian student on the train – experiences that highlight the difficulties we face. I share this not to instill fear, but to shed light on the challenges we face. I hope my message serves as a reminder for all students to be cautious while on the train, but also not to let fear control us. Together, we can navigate these challenges with resilience and solidarity.

I also heard the anguish of a young mother who felt she was “media-massacred” as a news correspondent urged her to recount her experience but to use only politically correct language and short sound bites so the news channels could feature her story:



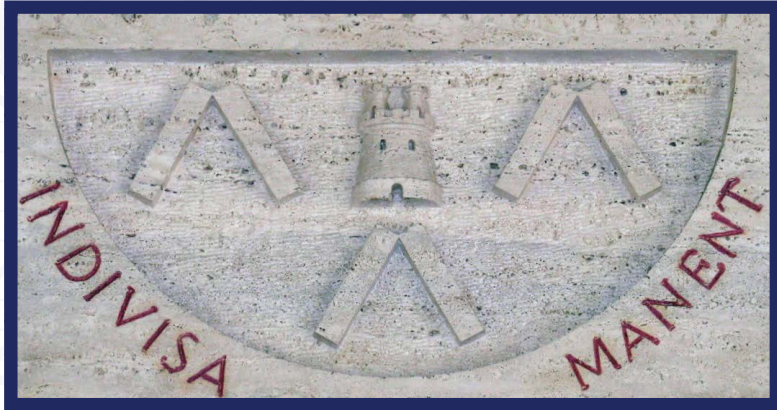
**I look inside of
me for strength
to be patient
but patience is
not at the tip
of my tongue
as the bombs
dropped...
And I recount,
I recount a
hundred dead,
a thousand**

**dead. Is anyone out there? Will anyone
listen? I wish I could wail over their bodies.
I wish I could just run barefoot in every
refugee camp and hold every child, cover
their ears so they wouldn't have to hear
the sound of bombings for the rest of their
lives the way I do... And no sound bite, no
sound bite I come up with, no matter how
good my English gets, no sound bite, no
sound bite, no sound bite, no sound bite
will bring them back to life. No sound bite
will fix this.**

There is a bronze statue of De La Salle along rue de Contrai in Reims outside the Lycee named in his honor. It has been worn out by sun and rain and has stood as a silent witness of the turmoil and violence during the Reign of Terror. One



can still notice the bullet hole that hit the heart of the boy standing beside the Founder. The invitation from John 20:27 is also for each of us: Put your finger here... Stop doubting and believe.



The star that led the shepherds to the manger still beckons us today to be with the children and young people who are far from salvation. How many still nurse wounds that have remained unnoticed and unattended? We have no gifts to bring except ourselves. We carry the burden of our past. We lament the sins of our present. We tremble in fear for our future. We carry on our breastplate and with pride our ***broken chevrons: Finite. Fragile. Free.***



Message of Pope Francis to Lasallians





**Lasallian Brothers,
warm greetings.
Keep up the good work!
I was told about the
“Leavening Project”.
I hear that it is good.
If it is good, do not give it up,
because in the apostolic life
it is also necessary to invent
methods.
The Gospel does not change,
but the methods do.
God bless you!**

Franciscus



CLICK HERE





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