



PASTORAL LETTER

ON THE INAUGURATION OF THE LASALLIAN EAST ASIA DISTRICT

24 April 2011
Easter Sunday

My dear Brothers and fellow Lasallians in East Asia,

May the blessings and peace of the Resurrected Christ be with us all as we embark on this historic journey to a future of greater fraternal communion of the Lasallian Family in this part of Asia!

We are deep in preparation for the inauguration of the new District and I send this letter in the hope that it will put us all in the proper frame of mind as we welcome and embrace a renewed Lasallian commitment.

In this season of Easter it is fitting that, while we close the books on each of our own unique and treasured histories, we also open a new chapter in the history of the Institute in this part of the world. At a time when our restructuring brings us uncertainty, I pray that each of us find reassurance from the prophet Jeremiah: *“For I know well the plans I have in mind for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare, not for woe! Plans to give you a future full of hope.”* (Jeremiah 29:11, NAB) These words reverberate throughout the history of religious life, in the life of the Catholic Church, and in all the stories of peoples and faiths. Our Superior General, Br. Álvaro Rodríguez Echeverría FSC, described this period of change as an opportunity to “open our gates and go outside the camp”.

Beginning in 2003, seven sectors in Asia, each with a significant Lasallian presence and a rich Lasallian heritage have consciously opted to “open their gates” and look beyond their borders. Together and in association with Lasallians around the world, these seven sectors will come together and create a new Lasallian future in this part of Asia. I believe that this intentional and collective choice will infuse vitality to our charism and mission. I share in the optimism and faith of Fr. Ottaviano D’Egidio, C.P. in his “Reflections on the Restructuring of the Passionist Congregation:”

“With the Church of Vatican II and of the post – Council we have made great strides at renewal, but it is necessary to go further. We cannot close our minds and hearts and enclose ourselves within old juridical structures hoping to preserve them. It is necessary to courageously go forward in order to be yeast in a changing world. The effectiveness of our Mission is our very life. We are alive if we carry out our Mission, as yeast is alive only when it leavens the dough. If yeast decides to preserve itself, it chooses death for its life force. Together we must overcome the resistance and fear in our own hearts and in the hearts of the religious entrusted to us. It might seem to be about death, but it will be a choice for life.”

OUR UNIQUE AND TREASURED HISTORIES

After the Intercapitular meeting in April I had the wonderful opportunity to visit our Founder’s birthplace and pray in the chapel where he offered his first Mass and I wondered to myself whether our Founder ever expected that two centuries later, his Brothers would cross vast oceans and establish Christian Schools in this part of the world. In his introduction in the MEL Bulletin 29, Br. Herman Lombaerts FSC writes:

“Progressively, largely following the French Revolution at the end of the 18th century and Secularisation at the beginning of the 20th (1904-1905), both of which changed the face of Catholic France, the

deployment of the works of the Institute was diversified through Brothers being sent to different corners of the world. Today the Lasallian network is integrated into socio – cultural, economic and openly pluralist political realities, in many contradictory respects in the modern world. With time, the international experience has turned out to be exceptionally enriching in understanding differently the educational mission and responsibility of the Institute.”

About 159 years ago, the first Brothers arrived in Singapore and Penang, Malaysia. The next few decades saw more Brothers reaching the shores of other countries in Southeast Asia and Japan. We remember these Brothers and are grateful for their generous response to the call of God to bring the Lasallian Mission to Asia. It could be that when these Brothers were told to go to Asia, they were as bewildered and possibly doubtful as the apostle Simon Peter when Jesus told him: “*Put out into deep water and lower your nets for a catch.*” (Luke 5:4)

Today, like Simon Peter, we continue to be amazed at the abundant catch that has resulted from this act of faith of the first Brothers. Our seven countries belong to a region that is “*a mosaic of religions, cultures, languages, and educational systems.*” The Lasallian presence, charism, mission and association continue to be profoundly enriched by the following distinct factors in this region:

1. All the major religions thrive in this part of the world;
2. “The levels of economic development vary from the very advanced to the underdeveloped,”
3. The socio – political milieus vary from country to country;
4. There is a diverse composition of race and ethnic backgrounds within and across the borders; and
5. “Almost all these countries experienced the positive as well as the adverse effects of colonization, with its long – term impact on political, socio – economic and educational systems.”

Over the years, these factors have led the Brothers to search for creative responses to the challenges of their unique contexts. Thus today we find Brothers and the members of the Lasallian Family in the seven sectors of LEAD involved in a wide array of ministries that are directly or indirectly educational ministries for the poor.

Our educational mission in Asia has grown and diversified beyond formal educational centers to include programs for the Youth-at-Risk, Persons with Special Needs, Adult Education, Catechetical Programs, and others. However, the tradition of excellence and providing quality human and Christian education to all those confided to our care continue to be our heritage and the hallmark of our communal commitments. We take pride in our graduates and alumni whose contributions to nation – building have been exceptional especially in the areas of public service, business, science and technology, education, arts and culture, sports, social justice, and even international relations.

TRANSFORMING OUR PRESENT FOR THE SAKE OF OUR MISSION

Brothers and fellow Lasallians, we live in an era in which globalization, greater international collaboration, migration, travel and tourism, justice, peace and environmental advocacies, and even social networking have brought each of our nations and peoples together as neighbors, partners, colleagues, and friends. These profound developments have brought us much closer at an unexpected pace. These changes and rapid development call us to make new commitments in order to insure the continuing vitality and relevance of the Lasallian presence and mission in the region we find ourselves in.

In the history of religious life, for example, profound changes brought periods of decline in vocations until adaptations brought new forms of religious communities. A recent study called “*Reconfiguring, Restructuring, Refounding: A Survey of Religious Life at the Crossroads*” by Ted Dunn, Ph.D., a consultant to several religious communities in the United States, describes this trend in religious life:

“Communities who want to make more proactive choices are searching for ways to adapt to changing circumstances and “choose life.” Some are choosing reconfiguring as an option for new life, joining with other communities of a similar charism (e.g., mergers, union and federation). Others are choosing restructuring (e.g., changing models of leadership; downsizing and reorganizing their structures). And others are choosing refounding (i.e., giving birth to transformative paradigms of religious life).”

Religious communities, like living organisms, need to adapt to a changing environment in order to ensure their vitality. The General Council’s Circular 454 on the “*Convocation of the 44th General Chapter*” recognized this reality when it called upon the Brothers to rethink their way of life for the sake of the mission:

“As we see the ever growing number of lay men and women who are passionate about the spirituality and the educational mission pioneered by St. John Baptist de La Salle, and as we witness the diminishment

and the aging of the Brothers in several sectors of the Institute as well as the resurgence of vocations in others parts, we are compelled to rethink so many aspects of our life: the revitalization of our communities, the specific role of the Brothers in this new form of Lasallian association, the formation required for these new times and places, the organizational restructuring at local and regional levels. All of this invites us to discover, in faith, the new direction toward which the Spirit of God is leading us.”

Hence, the General Council recommended in Circular 460: *“In view of their present fragility and scarce resources both in personnel and finances, some Districts may consider the possibility of restructuring in order to form larger administrative units.”* From the formation of the Alliance Council, to the naming of our District, to the Constitutive Assembly that drafted our Statutes, and to the nominations of our leadership team, we have responded well to these invitations to restructure. With our full participation in the consultation processes and the transparency of our decisions, our fraternal decision to become the Lasallian East Asia District is an act of faith on both a personal and communal level.

Like the progenitors of life that we see around us today, we seem to be undergoing a process of evolution from a single – celled organism towards a multi – cellular entity. However, this evolutionary undertaking brings with it the pain of losing the identity of our respective sectors. For some of us, this may necessitate a period of grieving for what we may give away and lose during this whole process of restructuring. Consequently, It will be healthy that we ritualize our goodbyes.

The Gospel of John offers us this consoling truth: *“Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat, but if it dies, it produces much fruit.”* (John 12:24) We can substitute “wheat” for the familiar “rice” in order to illustrate the paradoxical dynamics of the parable.

After harvesting, the rice grain is subjected to a series of processes decided by how it will be used. Drying is usually the first important phase since it prepares the grain for storage. In the end, whether the grain will be utilized for crop production or be milled and later cooked, it cannot be preserved forever, as it will gradually lose its ability to either generate life or become the life – giving staple on our dining tables. Whatever divine purpose is nudging us “in a quiet imperceptible way” to make this act of hope for the future of the Lasallian Mission, we are reminded that we cannot remain stagnant and that we are guaranteed that this is the life – giving path for us. Sr. Miriam D. Ukeritis, CSJ, Ph.D., perhaps best known for the FORUS (*Future of Religious Orders in the United States*) study, has this to say on our Christian tradition in living the Paschal Mystery:

“In our own paschal journeys, we may be more familiar and, perhaps, more comfortable with the times of death and dying, of diminishment and self-denial. This time of our lives and history challenges us to move through the spaces of death into life, to heed the ever-present call of the God whose desire for us is the fullness of life. We may choose to remain in the dark tomb. Or, we may choose to respond to the message of the resurrection that calls us, having known the reality of so many forms of death, to look at our lives, our communities, and our Church in the light of transformation that the changes we are experiencing demand. Then, individually and in communion with one another, we may embrace that spirit of new life that is the heritage that Jesus promises.”

Brothers and fellow Lasallians, we are not alone in our journey to restructure. Back in 1995, our American Brothers in St. Paul and Minneapolis, Chicago, and St. Louis Districts were asked “to make a leap of faith and begin a journey together, not fully knowing how it would affect (them),” to become the Midwest District. Over the last ten years, the Lasallian Family in other continents is already reaping the harvests from their restructuring. For example, the District of Central Europe is composed of Germany, Austria, Romania, Hungary, Slovakia and the Netherlands. Our Superior General, Br. Álvaro, cited this District as “an example of restructuring in the best possible sense. There are few linguistic or cultural similarities, but all are united in the same Lasallian spirit and mission.” Another is the District of the Middle East, described by Br. Álvaro as *“a unique District, made up of seven countries that belong to three different continents: Lebanon, Egypt, Sudan, Israel, Palestine, Jordan and Turkey. Like the District of Central Europe, this Region has undergone an excellent process of restructuring. The word that best sums up for me the reality of this District is complexity: different languages, cultures, ethnic groups, religions.”* Finally, we witnessed in 2009 the union of the American Districts of Baltimore, Long Island – New England, and New York, and Toronto, Canada as the new District of Eastern North America, wherein their commitment to renewed and dynamic efforts to attract many new members to our Institute is rekindling hope in that part of the continent.

Our choice to revitalize the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools and to creatively commit to re – found our presence for the Lasallian Mission in this part of Asia and the world will require a lot of work and will test the depth of our commitment. This process of death and rebirth is just the beginning of a long journey. We all know too

well that when Jesus rose from death, it was simply the dawn of Christian faith and much work had yet to be done since the “good news” needed to be proclaimed to all nations. Likewise, our Founder experienced several crises that threatened the survival of the Institute, one of which is aptly described in Circular 461:

“Furthermore, the community’s geographical range expands when the Founder and two Brothers go to Paris in 1688. This phase of structuring and expansion, however, leads to a crisis. During this time, the Writing Masters, displaced by De La Salle’s new schools, waged a veritable war against him and the Brothers. Exhaustion and disease took their toll on the fledgling community and many Brothers became ill and disillusioned. Also this new society struggled with issues of governance so that eventually, beset with what seemed insurmountable odds, half of the Brothers in Reims withdrew from the community between 1688 and 1692, and no additional candidates presented themselves. The edifice threatened collapse just at the moment when it was being built is how the Lasallian biographer, Canon Blain, later would write about this early period.”

Nonetheless, we see in our Institute’s birthing pains the purposefulness of our Founder to act in faith and in hope so as to give a full life to our vocation and mission. In his article called “*Restructuring for Mission: To Live and Give Witness to the Experience of God*,” Fr. David Kalert, OMI explains: “*It is only in living the new reality patiently and prayerfully that we will be able to fully implement the new structure. No matter how long and thorough the discussions, the full impact comes only in living the new structure day to day.*” This “living the new reality” demands our personal as well as communal spiritual renewal.

CONCLUSION

My visit this April to the Founder’s birthplace and the cathedral where his faith was formed had an unexpectedly profound and moving effect on me. I thought it was not coincidental that this opportunity presented itself just as we were deep in preparations for the new District. I prayed in profound gratitude for all the Brothers and Lasallian partners, those who have come before us and those with whom we are blessed to work with today.

As we begin this endeavor, this “leap of faith,” I am reminded of the invitation to Simon Peter to “cast the net over the right side of the boat”. The first Brothers came to Asia to lower their nets in deeper waters. Today, we hear the same call and invitation to “cast our nets over the right side.”

Brothers and fellow Lasallians, when we “*cast our nets*” today, simple as it may sound, we make an act of faith. Stephen Glodek, SM explains: “*Restructuring is above all else a statement of faith. It is a faith-filled assertion that the gospel can be still be lived... Restructuring is a commitment of fidelity to refound our charism in this time and in this culture.*” Let us, then, offer to God our own bewilderment and doubts as we make an act of hope that will hopefully result in a bountiful catch.

Let us place our faith and hope in the Holy Spirit who makes all things new. Let us welcome this new form of our Lasallian presence in East Asia as we now journey together to a shared future built upon our faith and our love of God.

Live Jesus in Our Hearts!



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Visitor Designate



LASALLIAN EAST ASIA DISTRICT