



**Brothers of
the Christian
Schools**

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**REIMAGINING
OUR LIFE
AS BROTHERS**



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REIMAGINING OUR LIFE AS BROTHERS*



* From "A Guide to the Lasallian Mission Moving Forward Plan," May 25, 2020.

CONTEXT

THE BROTHERS COMMIT THEMSELVES
TO THE INSTITUTE IN ALL THEIR
UNIQUENESS AS PERSONS.
AWARE OF THE DIFFICULTIES THAT
AWAIT THEM, THEY ARE READY
TO RESPOND JOYFULLY AND
CREATIVELY TO THE SUCCESSIVE
CALLS OF GOD AT THE VARIOUS
STAGES OF THEIR LIFE (RULE 32.1).

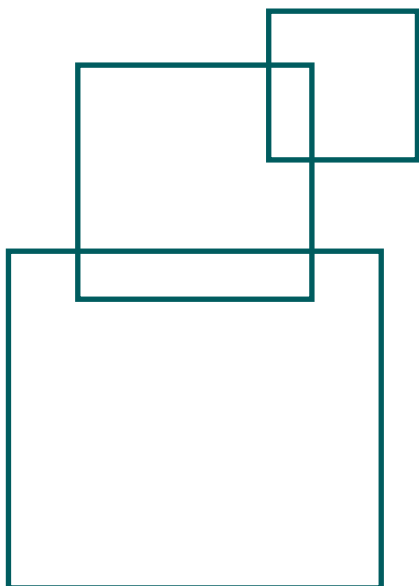
We are in a crisis. The mission is severely impacted and so are other constitutive elements of our lives as Brothers: spiritual life, community life, consecrated life, formation and training, governance, and leadership. Pope Francis reminds us in his encyclical letter *Laudato si'* that all of life is linked: the way we treat others, the way we treat ourselves, the way we treat creation and the way we relate to the Creator. It is in the context of an ecological crisis that we are facing a health crisis, one that calls us to “hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor” (LS 49).

Embedded in the narrative of the Brothers of the Christian Schools are stories of adversity. Brothers have been displaced and persecuted, even killed, during civil and international wars; they have been suppressed as a religious community; educational works and property have been shuttered and nationalized. In the face of single and prolonged encounters with adversity the Brothers have responded with thought and care. When we look back at these stories, indeed when we look at today's stories, we are struck by the marks of creativity and resourcefulness. Sometimes that creativity takes the form of mobility—bringing the mission to another land; sometimes it takes the form of adapting the mission—opening motorcycle maintenance shops; sometimes it takes the form of re-purposing community life—caring for sick prisoners of war.

Brothers of the Christian Schools

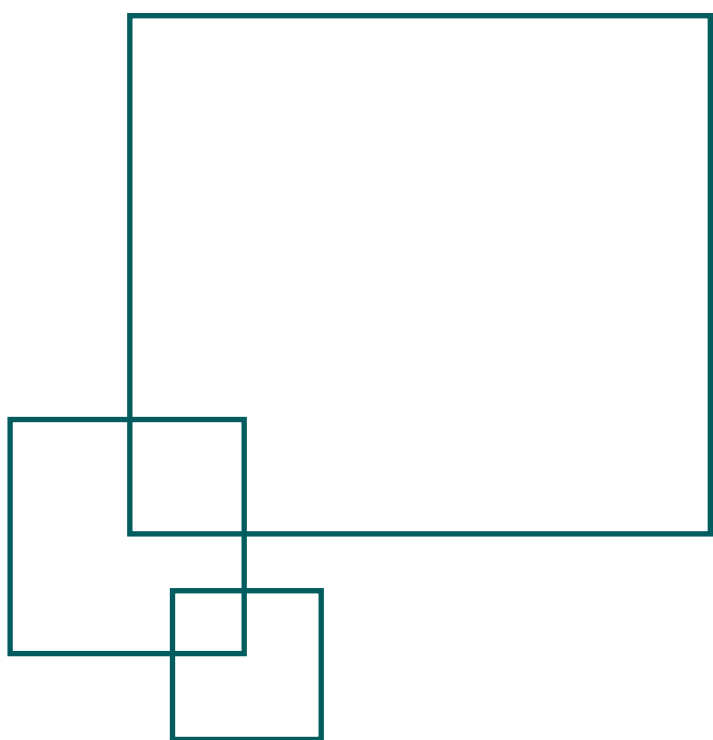
Today we can be inspired by the courage and resilience of the individual, the community, the district, and Institute in our history. We might ask, where did this courage and resilience come from? What were the sources? But then, we are not only interested in these questions as an exercise in historical research. We too are faced with a crisis in our day and time, one that has left no country untouched, so our question is meant to be in the present tense: What sources can we as Brothers draw upon to imagine new ways to live and act, ways that are at the same time grounded in their original and sustaining purpose?

As an initial response to this question, we would like to propose our vow of association for the educational service of the poor. This vow “. . . unites each Brother strongly with the other Brothers, while also extending and strengthening the spirit of belonging to, and in solidarity with, the whole Institute. This charismatic dynamism stimulates the creativity of the Brothers to provide the best possible and lasting response to the needs of those who benefit from their mission” (*Rule*, 27). We can also turn to our partners and associates who accompany us in the mission, and whose commitment is a living source for the revitalization of our vocation. In this ongoing period of crisis, solidarity will provide the energy we need to provide *the best possible and lasting response* to the needs of those who suffer, those who are entrusted to our care.



We know from experience that crisis can tempt us to withdraw into ourselves and to what is familiar and normal. Such a withdrawal can silence our imagination and quench the movement of the life-giving Spirit (1 Thess 5.19). This vow, along with the vow of stability, provides a pathway for a joyful and creative response to the challenges to human dignity and health from local and global injustices, climate change, and viruses.

The heroic vow in 1691, a key turning point in our history, was made in the face of crisis. It was a bold and radical act of hope that continues to breathe life into our association. The root of this hope, shared and sealed in the community alliance of the three brothers, was sustained by the creative fidelity and stability in their hearts. It serves as an impetus to re-imagine our lives and renew our minds and hearts and commit to new action. We would like to suggest four steps in a process that could help us go forth in joy and with creative, life-giving energy for new action.



First, let us name the fragility we experience; second, let us commit to growth; to assist us in this growth we can re-engage with our foundational sources of meaning and re-imagine our life as Brothers; finally, let us re-commit to a life and witness that will sustain our renewal.

REIMAGINING OUR LIFE, RENEWING OUR MIND AND HEART: STEPS ON A NEW JOURNEY

IN THE [NINETEENTH] CENTURY A TOURIST
FROM THE STATES VISITED THE FAMOUS POLISH RABBI
HAFEZ HAYYIM. HE WAS ASTONISHED TO SEE THAT
THE RABBI'S HOME WAS ONLY A SIMPLE ROOM FILLED
WITH BOOKS. THE ONLY FURNITURE WAS A TABLE AND
A BENCH.

“RABBI, WHERE IS YOUR FURNITURE?” ASKED THE
TOURIST.

“WHERE IS YOURS?” REPLIED HAFEZ.

“MINE? BUT I’M ONLY A VISITOR HERE.”

“SO AM I,” SAID THE RABBI.

The Song of the Bird, Anthony de Mello, p. 137

This crisis reminds us of our mortality. It has a message for us, even if unwanted: life is short, we are only passing through. Further, we share this fragility with others. Even if we are shielded in some ways from the risks that others who are more vulnerable face, our lives are threatened by a micro-organism that has a macro-social power and impact.

It's quite human to be in denial and to resist accepting the power of the virus. At the same time, it is important to be aware that resistance is futile and it is unhealthy to get caught up in "magical thinking" that things will soon return to normal. It is also important to come to terms with our loss and to grieve the loss of a way of living that was meaningful and rewarding.

A sudden and unexpected series of events naturally leads to disorientation. For us as Brothers, we are especially "out of sorts." We have been told to **stay in** and at home in order to stay safe, in effect to live a semi-cloistered life—which runs against the grain of an apostolic sense of witness that impels us to **go out** to the need. As educators we are used to planning and preparing for the future. Yet, we don't have reliable information to effectively anticipate the future needs of those entrusted to our care.

Our spiritual and inner life is altered as well. We may be dry and empty, especially if our worship and prayer has largely been centered in a celebration for God's goodness and blessings for lives marked by peace and prosperity. Re-centering our spirituality as one of fragility and lament that God's people suffer and are denied peace and prosperity, at the hands of human and natural forces, is difficult.

BE ASSURED, THEN, THAT ONCE YOU HAVE PLACED YOURSELF IN GOD'S HANDS, WILLING TO SUFFER WHATEVER AND AS MUCH AS HE MAY DESIRE, ALTHOUGH HE STILL LEAVES YOU IN SORROW, HE WILL HELP YOU BY HIS GRACE TO ENDURE THIS TRIAL, PERHAPS IN A WAY THAT IS NOT OBVIOUS, OR ELSE HE WILL DELIVER YOU FROM IT BY SURPRISING MEANS AND AT A TIME WHEN YOU LEAST EXPECT IT (M 20.3).

The second step in our creative and life-giving response is making a commitment to grow.

The fundamental principle of all human maturity and spiritual growth is the ability to take reality as it is.¹ That includes the contradiction, suffering, and darkness that comes without invitation. The virus has served notice that we are not in control and that it has lessons it wishes to impart.

Growth comes when we accept that being vulnerable is no longer something that only happens to others. Everyone is vulnerable, rich or poor, young or old, educated or ignorant, with or without any power. It means that we are, whether we like it or not, are handed over to one another, responsible for one another. Creative and life-giving energy is unleashed when we accept the grace in learning that vulnerability evokes a kind of shared intimacy shared with things, with beings, with people.²

Growth comes when we grieve what we have lost but do not succumb to a kind of paralyzing regret. Instead we hear a new call from the Spirit, a call in the voices and lives of the poor to whose suffering is only

¹ "Diminution, A Time of Grace for Living in Faith," Maria Isabel Ardanza Mendilibar, CCV, USIG Bulletin No 154 (2014), p. 17.

² "Editorial," Pierre Ouattara, FSC, RELAF Newsletter No 34 (March 2020), pp. 3-4.

deepened by the crisis. We are presented with an opportunity to question our own way of living, our own economic privilege, our own use of resources. Creative and life-giving energy is unleashed when we accept the grace in learning what the virus has exposed, namely, that the “normal” was marked by inequities and injustices.

Growth comes when we open ourselves to the possibility that some of what we were doing pre-virus are things we should no longer be doing, and that the old dysfunctional order must give way to the new. We grow when we discover in every moment, every stage, and every setback an opportunity. Creative and life-giving energy is unleashed when we accept the grace of our calling as men who are consecrated for others.

Growth comes when we recall that suffering offers a pathway to maturing. The awareness of our common vulnerability to a pandemic obliges us to live the values of solidarity with personal and collective responsibility.³ Creative and life-giving energy is unleashed when we recognize the grace of learning that even if the beauty in life cannot cancel out the sorrow of so many, neither does the sorrow cancel the beauty.

Perhaps the greatest source of encouragement for the long road of reimagination and renewal is the indwelling presence of God. We are loved and never abandoned.

I PRAY THAT THE GOD OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST,
THE ALL-GLORIOUS FATHER, MAY CONFER ON YOU
THE SPIRITUAL GIFTS OF WISDOM AND VISION,
WITH THE KNOWLEDGE OF HIM THAT THEY BRING,
SO THAT, WITH THE EYES OF YOUR HEART
ENLIGHTENED, YOU MAY KNOW WHAT IS THE HOPE
TO WHICH HE HAS CALLED YOU, WHAT ARE THE
RICHES OF HIS GLORIOUS INHERITANCE AMONG
THE SAINTS, AND WHAT IS THE IMMEASURABLE
GREATNESS OF HIS POWER FOR THOSE WHO
BELIEVE, ACCORDING TO THE WORKING OF HIS
GREAT POWER (EPHESIANS 1.17-19).

³ Ibid.

Two years ago Brother Superior wrote, “As we mark the 50th anniversary of the closing of the 39th General Chapter of renewal and the publication of *The Brother of the Christian Schools in the World Today: A Declaration*, we are invited to return to our sources: the Gospel, our charism, and our Lasallian foundational story.”⁴ These same sources—as well as the mystics, saints, and prophets of our faith tradition—are key for the personal and community work of reimagination and renewal.

Perhaps we can enter into this third step with the approach the Founder took in writing the Meditations for the Time of Retreat. Michel Sauvage noted that he “reread in faith the itinerary of the founding of the Institute as the gift that the Holy Spirit gave to the Church: an apostolic community with an original face, dedicated to manifesting the reality of the Kingdom and of the transforming power of the Gospel by the human development of the poor, the proclamation of the Word, and the Christian initiation of the young.”⁵ We too can critically reread in faith what we are experiencing, enlightened by the Gospel, our charism, and our foundational story.

Wisdom literature, particularly the Psalms, brings the prayer of lament, petition, and praise to experience. Psalms 23, 40, 62, and 138 are examples that we can bring to our critical reflection. We can open our hearts to the penetrating presence of God who, even in trial and tribulation, sustains us.

⁴ “Signs of New Life Are Everywhere!” Message of Brother Superior, May 15, 2018.

⁵ *Fragile Hope of a Witness*, Michel Sauvage and Miguel Campos, Lasallian Studies No 18 (Brothers of the Christian Schools: Rome), p. 269.

Prophetic literature often addresses the reality of pestilence. Isaiah reminds the Israelites that YHWH is supreme. Their royal treasury will not save. Their military establishment will not save. The idols will not save.⁶ Only God saves, because as Jeremiah urges, “Give thanks to the LORD of hosts, for the LORD is good, for his steadfast love endures forever!” (33.11). It is the witness of Jeremiah that in the midst of abandonment, God has not abandoned.⁷

Saint Paul’s understanding of suffering and strength open our experience to examination. He challenges us to consider how our apostolic and evangelizing mission might adapt while retaining its core purposes (e.g., Colossians 1.24-29; 2 Corinthians 12.9). The paschal journey of Jesus, though presented through different theological and pastoral lenses, reveals to us the unwavering conviction that God is present in adversity. Jesus’s faith, that is, his utter conviction that God is love, calls us to the same depth. From this depth, we can, in Paul’s words, receive and apply the spiritual gifts of wisdom and vision to the reality we are living.

De La Salle’s responses to suffering in his own life are instructive. His fidelity to his call to found an educational response grounded in a community of faith is all the more remarkable when one considers the difficulties he encountered over the course of his life. Indeed, his life is a homily, offering us encouraging insight into how to make of one’s “whole life a process of identification with Jesus Christ ‘the first born of many brothers’ in order to be the living memory of his love, and to continue his ministry of salvation” (R, 23). It was De La Salle’s rich prayer and deep spiritual life that enabled him to overcome every adversity. How rich and deep is ours?

⁶ *Virus as a Summons to Faith: Biblical Reflections in a Time of Loss, Grief, and Uncertainty*, Walter Brueggemann (Eugene, OR: Cascade), 2020.

⁷ Ibid.

We can take the accompaniment and counsel he offered the early Brothers in his correspondence and in the meditations as our own. Like the early Brothers, we have been schooled in an incarnational spirituality that is echoed in our prayer that Jesus lives in our hearts. We might overlook, however, the five ways to pray from the heart that De La Salle explicated in *The Duties of a Christian*. The fifth way: “But one of the best ways of praying the prayer of the heart is to pray by our sufferings. We do this when we patiently support the difficulties sent us by God with the intention of honoring him or to obtain some spiritual benefit or temporal advantage.”⁸

De La Salle was no stranger to vulnerability in the fledgling community. They were easy targets for ridicule, lawsuits, impoverishment, illness and death. Rather than see suffering as a reason to turn from God, he saw in suffering an opportunity to move toward the loving presence. We can hear echoes of this history and heritage in the way we speak of ourselves: “. . . They generously put their time, their talents, their energy, and their sufferings at the service of those God entrusts to them” (R, 21).

Drawing on this rich treasury of Scripture, our charism and our Lasallian foundational story, can we perhaps re-read in faith our journey to this point and find clarity and courage for responding to God’s calling in the chaos the virus has wrought?

WHEN IT WAS ALREADY DAWN, JESUS WAS
STANDING ON THE SHORE; BUT THE DISCIPLES DID
NOT REALIZE THAT IT WAS JESUS. JESUS SAID TO
THEM, “CHILDREN, HAVE YOU CAUGHT ANYTHING
TO EAT?” THEY ANSWERED HIM, “NO.” SO HE SAID TO
THEM, “CAST THE NET OVER THE RIGHT SIDE OF THE
BOAT AND YOU WILL FIND SOMETHING.” SO THEY
CAST IT, AND WERE NOT ABLE TO PULL IT IN
BECAUSE OF THE NUMBER OF FISH (JOHN 21.4-6).

⁸ Book One,
Section II,
Treatise
Chapter V,
Section 1.

The health crisis is accelerating profound changes we cannot easily identify, let alone describe. Yet we know instinctually that we are undergoing a significant, likely permanent, shift in consciousness. The assumptions underlying our meanings, symbols, values, and narratives are being called into question. The vulnerability and precariousness that is now a part of our lives demands to be added to the assumptions that will shape our lives. Jesus is encouraging us to re-cast our nets in new places.

So while it may be premature to outline what shape our reimagined and renewed life as Brothers might take, in this fourth step we can commit to a life and witness that will sustain our renewal. In the course of our reflection and discernment we can:

- a) accept with grace the vulnerability we carry.
- b) simplify our lives, consume less, and help sustain those more vulnerable than us.
- c) enter into grateful communion with creation, and care for our common home in order to recreate a better world for all.
- d) engage in relentless, uncompromising hope, promoting an understanding that the lethal force of the virus will be outflanked by the goodness of God.
- e) witness to the steadfast love of God that always outlasts the suffering caused by pestilence.
- f) cultivate in our lives Jesus's mystical awareness of God's loving presence and prophetic concern for the poor.
- g) discern the mission God wishes to entrust to us individually and as community circumstances change
- h) like Jesus, allow our heart to be drawn out to those who are tired and weary, physically and spiritual hungry. We can feed the thousands and work miracles in our own day and time.
- i) pray, "Jesus, you were sent forth on a pilgrimage of love; grant that we may take the same path to your presence."

CON CLU SION

IN HIS FINAL YEARS, DE LA SALLE
REMAINED IMAGINATIVE, ENERGIZED,
LIFE-GIVING, AND GENERATIVE. HE DID
NOT DWELL ON LOSS; BUT RATHER, HE
FOCUSED ON LIFE. AND SO HIS EARTHLY
JOURNEY LAUNCHED A MOVEMENT THAT
IS ALWAYS BEING RE-BORN.
("SIGNS OF NEW LIFE ARE EVERYWHERE!"
MESSAGE OF BROTHER SUPERIOR,
MAY 15, 2018.)

As members of a community in a health crisis such as this, it always about “we” and only occasionally about “me.” At the same time, it is imperative that one cares for one’s overall health. This is the first and necessary step in apostolic ministry. For instance, the crisis evokes a range of emotions, so each of us need to feel them, name them, own them, express them and integrate them.

The four steps offered as a pathway to reimagine our life and renew our heart and mind are meant to be followed as a group or community. It is also important to invite our partners and associates with whom we share the mission to contribute to the reflection—we can ask them to help us to reimagine our life and renew our mind and heart. The nature of our consecration and association is such that together we read the signs of the times and discern together the will of God (R, 46).

Together we are called to remain imaginative and generative. The very qualities that have sustained us through our history are the qualities that will sustain us today: our simplicity of life, solidarity with the poor, and trust in the loving presence of God. The unity and continuity of this sacred charism and mission which God has entrusted us is in our hands.

RESOURCES:

Brueggemann, Walter, *Virus as a Summons to Faith: Biblical Reflections in a Time of Loss, Grief, and Uncertainty*, (Eugene, OR: Cascade), 2020.

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