

God's Reassuring Presence in the Mist of our Tears

Keynote Address by Br. Armin A. Luistro FSC
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Br. Robert Schieler FSC, Superior General; Br. Christy Croos FSC, Brother Visitor of the District of Colombo; Distinguished Lasallian awardees; Merit of Service honorees; my dear confreres, the De La Salle Brothers; dedicated Lasallian teachers and staff, alumni and students; Ladies and Gentlemen: I join you today in joyful celebration of our twin feasts this year, the 150th of Lasallian presence in Sri Lanka and the Lasallian Tricentennial celebration worldwide.

Just eighteen weeks ago, Christians in Colombo were also in a celebratory mood for that most solemn feast of Easter when the carnage was launched. By remembering something so tragic, my intention is not to douse the euphoria in today's festivities. In fact, I am convinced that we choose to gather again today because of our **unshakeable faith** that God's silence does not mean He is absent. We are united as one family today because of our **undiminished hope** that death does not deserve to have the last word. We join hands defiantly proclaiming with **unfathomable love** that it is in pardoning that we are pardoned.



This is a day of remembering. We choose to remember because no celebration is possible without remembrance. Elie Wiesel,¹ survivor of the Holocaust, has this to say:

Yes, our stories are essential—essential to memory.... What is a witness if not someone who has a tale to tell and lives only with one haunting desire: to tell it. Without memory, there is no culture. Without memory, there would be no civilization, no society, no future. After all, God is God because he remembers.

In a matter of hours, many news agencies reported the carnage in a stark and matter-of-factly way: “A string of eight devastating blasts, including suicide attacks, struck churches and luxury hotels frequented by tourists in Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday, killing 215 people and shattering a decade of peace in the island nation since the end of the brutal civil war...”² Br. Christy brought us last night to visit St. Anthony's Shrine. While the renovation has been amazingly fast and the security around the perimeter is certainly reassuring, the sacred

¹ From <https://www.npr.org/2008/04/07/89357808/a-god-who-remembers>.

² PTI Colombo, 2019. “215 killed, around 500 injured as blasts hit churches, luxury hotels on Easter in Sri Lanka,” from <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/world/80-injured-as-blasts-hit-two-churches-in-sri-lanka/article26903218.ece>, published 21 April 2019.



space still breathes an eerie silence for all men and women of goodwill, including the Hindu whom we noticed was whispering a prayer to St. Anthony last night. Our collective grief still clouds our vision today as the disciples experienced on the road to Emmaus. Marcelo Souza's³ insights on that Emmaus narrative may help us cope with our sorrow and shock today:

Life is full of contradictions, perplexities, pain, and lack of answers. Evil often seems to be gratuitous. Suffering comes to the just and the unjust. There is unimaginable darkness in this world, and we often have to be face to face with despair, disappointment, and anger.... Open your hearts, for the healer of your souls is close to you even when you can't recognize him through the **mist of your tears**.

Our 50 Lasallian honorees and awardees are here to tell their story through the mist of their tears. Gathered before a single oil lamp flickering in our dreary world, we are privileged to hear the stories of their Lasallian journey, but maybe not in words. "Deeds not Words," as Diyagala Boys' Town would put it. We celebrate with them, we stand with them simply because, in the words of *Gaudium et Spes*:⁴ "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts." If we dare enough to walk together along this blurry road, we will surely discover that our lives are not single strands swaying in the darkness of the night but are actually intricately woven together into a bigger story—God's story.

If we look with just our eyes, we could be in a terrible long night. A couple of weeks after the Colombo bombing, the New York Times printed a description of what journalist Hannah Beech⁵ saw:

Sri Lanka is an impossibly lovely island, a pendant suspended off the Indian subcontinent that for centuries attracted traders and evangelists in search of spices and souls. But this is also a war-wounded nation that popularized the use of the suicide bomber vest, a place far more compact than the Balkans yet cleaved by more divisions: ethnic, religious and class. If it is renowned for its beauty, Sri Lanka has become equally defined by its hate... every violent episode breeds fear that the nation will fracture in new and unexpected ways, leading to yet more bloodshed.



"We have many clashes of civilizations on a small island; it's hard to know how to overcome our divided history," muses Nirmal Ranjith Dewasiri, an academic. M.A. Sumanthiran, a human rights

³ Marcelo P. Souza, "The Road to Emmaus—Their Eyes were Opened in the Breaking of the Bread," from <https://luminousdarkcloud.wordpress.com/2013/04/01/the-road-to-emmaus-their-eyes-were-opened-in-the-breaking-of-the-bread/>, (emphasis added).

⁴ Pope Paul VI, 1965. *Gaudium et Spes*: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Preface no. 1.

⁵ Hannah Beech, 2019. "A New Enemy but the Same Hate": Can Sri Lanka Heal Its Divisions?" *New York Times*, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/05/world/asia/sri-lanka-attacks-hate.html>, published 5 May 2019.

lawyer, dissects the problem: “Now it’s back to normal in Sri Lanka. We have a new enemy but the same hate... Our problem is that, fundamentally, minority rights, religious or ethnic, are treated with disrespect and with force... Until we resolve this, Sri Lanka will be stained in blood.” My favorite is Ganeshan, a textile merchant, who has a simple but profound insight: “People talk with their tongues about peace, but their hearts are not in it, because as long as one community wants to rule another, it will not stop.”⁶

Today for our twin Lasallian celebration, God’s invitation for us is to see the same story with the eyes of faith as our distinguished Lasallians have done all through the years. Leonard Pinto,⁷ a Lasallian himself, describes part of that story:

From 1920 to 1958 [the De La Salle Brothers] opened colleges in provincial towns. Most of the students of these schools belonged to the middle or lower-middle class. These Christian colleges also welcomed Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims and treated them equally. Each class had about 10 per cent of non-Catholics, and some schools had a large percentage of Buddhists.

Referring to the overall contribution of the Catholic Church, Pinto⁸ quotes Fernando (1963) thus:

In their well-conducted schools, the Catholic Church provided some of the best educational institutions that became the leading schools in the country.... [They] helped to break down the barriers of caste prejudice in accepting scholars of all castes and classes into their schools. The Catholic missionaries provided non-proselytising denominational schools for Catholics without excluding others.



Today’s remembrance and celebration is not just about waving the Lasallian flags and tooting our horns. American historian Howard Zinn⁹ points out:

To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. What we choose to emphasize... will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places—and there are so many—where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction. ...we don’t have to wait for some grand utopian future... To live now,... in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory.

Today, we feast as at harvest season on Lasallian fruits from the labor of many years of commitment of thousands of Brothers and Lasallian Partners who have worked *together and by association* to create spaces for an inclusive education in a multi-cultural and multi-faith setting. We do not have a

⁶ Beech, 2019.

⁷ Leonard Pinto, 2015. Being a Christian in Sri Lanka: Historical, Political, Social, and Religious Considerations, Bloomington: Balboa Press, p. 107.

⁸ Pinto, 2015, p. 103.

⁹ From <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/2229-to-be-hopeful-in-bad-times-is-not-just-foolishly>.

monopoly of this goodness. In a neighborhood here in Colombo where a Bodhi tree stands, Kolonnawe Narada Thero, temple abbot, has opened the sacred space to welcome everyone:¹⁰

After an evangelical Christian church and school were forced out of nearby premises in 2011, he welcomed the Christians and their students into his compound. Today, children supported by the Christian charity still study on temple grounds. 'If you have a garden and only have roses, it will not be as beautiful as if you have lots of different flowers,' the abbot said.

This is why John Baptist de La Salle left his home and gave up his wealth: to live with his Brothers. This is what De La Salle taught the first Brothers: that we are Brothers to one another and older Brothers to our students. This is what we celebrate today: 150 years of brotherhood and sisterhood with many associates—lay, whether single or married; clerics and religious from other congregations; women and men of goodwill from other faith traditions. This is what we painfully embrace in the mist of our tears: that today more than ever we need to learn how to live as sisters and brothers of only one Father who is in heaven.

We do not celebrate just for ourselves. Shenon and Sholan, Grades 6 and 11, respectively at the time of the bombing, were both welcomed back to La Salle Institute's English-medium school in Kotahena by Br. Bertram Perera, their teachers and classmates on 20 June this year.¹¹ We need to stand up and celebrate today for the sake of Shenon and Sholan and all the young people in this country who long for peace.



Let me end with this quote from John Baptist de La Salle (portrayed by actor Mel Ferrer) in a 2010 film:¹²



Real wealth is the ability to think and to feel, not being possessed by possessions, to give, to receive... Children know this. There is no class distinction among men. If I can open their minds and let the sun enter in; if enough of us can do this. If we can reach beyond the boundaries marked rich and poor. If we can open their minds to this light, the world will become a brighter place closer to peace, closer to human fraternity.

May our celebration today give us fresh energy to face a cruel, corrupted, and dangerous world. May our remembrance help us to stand in defiance against all the anger, injustice and heartlessness we see around us. May the Eucharist we share at the altar of Christ's sacrifice and at the classrooms of God's surprise grant us the grace to recognize God's reassuring presence in the mist of our tears.

Nanri. Maraming salamat po. Obata Stutiya.

¹⁰ Beech, 2019.

¹¹ Photo and caption from "Easter Sunday terror attacks returned to school," in *Daily News*, Colombo, 20 June 2019, retrieved from <http://www.dailynews.lk/2019/06/20/local/188907/easter-sunday-terror-attacks-returned-school>.

¹² From https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=oQ757_jatoc, clips taken from the 2010 film, "St. John Baptist de La Salle: the Patron Saint of Teachers," San Francisco: Ignatius Press.