



Brothers of
the Christian
Schools

La  Salle

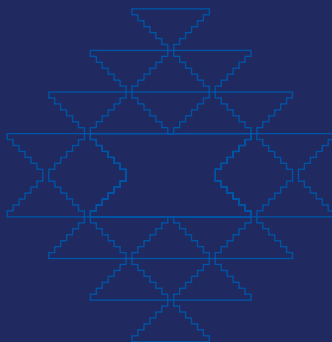


Our *heart*
in the **peripheries:**

Renewing the **Lasallian Mission**
with Lessons from *Indigenous peoples*



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the Christian
Schools**



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from Indigenous peoples**

Pastoral Letter to the Lasallian Family

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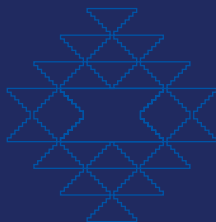
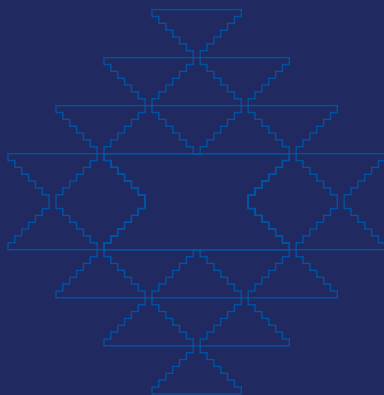
December 25, 2024

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BROTHERS OF THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS

Our *heart* in the **peripheries:**

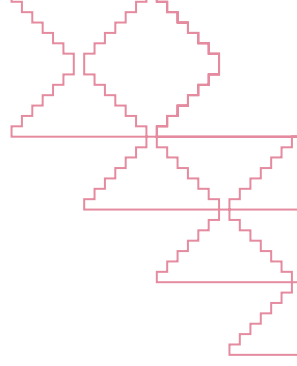
Renewing the **Lasallian Mission**
with Lessons from *Indigenous peoples*

PASTORAL LETTER TO THE LASALLIAN FAMILY

Br. Armin A. Luistro FSC

ROME, DECEMBER 25, 2024

La  Salle



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Prologue



Bull of Approbation
by Pope Benedict
XIII

Unpacking education may be the biggest challenge for an Institute that has outlived and outsmarted social and political upheavals in many parts of the world for 344 years. The tercentenary of the issuance of Pope Benedict XIII's Bull of Approbation this coming year is an opportune time to celebrate the stability and social protection that an official recognition of the Church or State affords. But our long history, tradition, reputation, or legal status should not numb us to complacency; on the contrary, it should sensitize us to the continuing threats to schools and the fragility even of long-established institutions. Today, we are all painfully aware of the

global crises in education and some very real threats to the sustainability of our schools.

As I pen these lines, military offensives continue to escalate in Lebanon and in the Holy Land. A secondary school student shares his seemingly mundane fears:



Our house is barely standing, and I haven't seen it since Israel has put up the 500-meter radius security zone. The roads are blocked by big rocks, and we cannot access our house. We cannot get there by car and could only cross on foot. Who do I talk to if we start school on October 7? We don't have electricity so I don't know if I can even join the virtual sessions. But I don't want to miss my classes.



Picture from Palestina, Gaza. 📷 Pixabay

A good-hearted person may easily give up upon realizing that one is caught in a precarious situation or is facing an impregnable wall; more so, if one relies solely on one's talents, strengths, and resources. But what if one's passion to make a difference is

cultivated into a conviction that the desired result is worth the fight? Such faith and zeal would surely generate creative thinking, gain support from like-minded dreamers, and nurture grit and resilience. This is the heart of our founding story:



A brilliant and creative innovator in his vision of the school, in the concept of the teacher and in teaching methods, Saint John Baptist de La Salle developed the firm conviction that education was a right for all, including the poor. Therefore, to dedicate himself to the education of the most disadvantaged social class, he established a lay community to pursue this ideal, convinced, the Holy Father emphasized, that ‘the Church could not continue to ignore the social contradictions of the time that she is called to confront’.¹



While rooted in our founding story and attentive to the emerging needs of the young and the poor, we cannot keep repeating the same formula of success documented in many versions of the *Conduct of Schools* and modern manuals that have been the playbook for many Lasallian schools through the centuries. Neither should we just focus our energies on the continuous improvement of internal systems and processes. Sometimes, the best insights come about when we plunge into an unexplored blue ocean, or because of a serendipitous encounter during an unplanned trip, or with the discovery of an ancient wisdom that has been forgotten.

We certainly cannot continue to ignore the social contradictions of our time. Faced with seemingly insurmountable challenges, we could learn invaluable lessons from those who have realized a

¹ Pope Francis, 2019. *Address to the Brothers of the Christian Schools*, 2019 May 16. Holy See Press Office Bulletin 2019, #190516b.

long time ago that it truly takes a village—and many generations—to educate a child.

Indigenous communities from the peripheries of the world have never wavered in their commitment to preserve, enrich, and pass on to the next generation their values, knowledge, and spirituality despite oppression and marginalization from society at large.

I imagine John Baptist de La Salle would have been thrilled if he had the chance to encounter Indigenous peoples in his lifetime. Why miss the opportunity now? But before we can even take the first step, we need to remove the sandals from our feet, dispose ourselves to silence, and then heed the gentle voice of the Spirit leading God’s people to a wisdom ever ancient, ever new.

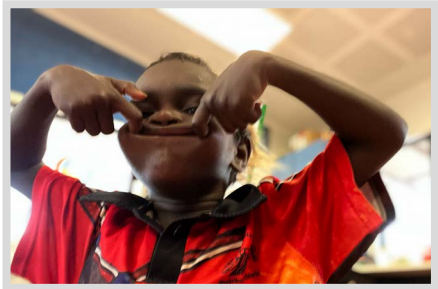
This year’s pastoral letter invites you, dear reader, to consider the lessons one may glean from the cultural practices, traditional knowledge, and profound wisdom of many Indigenous communities. If we are open to surprises, we may stumble upon a pearl of great price that could revolutionize the way we conduct schools and eventually develop an effective solution to the existing education crises in our world. The stories and reflections shared in this pastoral letter are not just narratives of service but testimonies to the transformative power of accompaniment, solidarity, and friendship. Some vignettes highlight the need for awareness, others spark empathy, while a few others describe the learning moments with Indigenous peoples.

The introductory essay (I) describes how an encounter between Lasallians and Indigenous communities may lead to a real conversion experience for both. The first three vignettes (II–IV) narrate early experiences leading to such an

encounter, identifying some initial obstacles but also a few helpful openings that lead to greater awareness, respect, appreciation, and acceptance of marginalized communities. These are followed by three other narratives (V-VII) which provide us with a deeper insight into the world of Indigenous peoples and the treasures of wisdom and spirituality in their care. Four Lasallian educators and a researcher (VIII-XII) undergo a soul-searching as they look back on their experience in indigenous people education and name their struggles and missteps but also their small victories and profound insights. The last four vignettes (XIII – XVI) provide us a sneak peek into the inner journey—mind and heart, soul and being—of the main characters in this transformational engagement.

Drawing from the lived experience of selected Lasallians who have dared to go beyond their comfort zones, I invite you to take an exciting journey as we deconstruct education, this time from the prism of Indigenous communities in selected areas of the globe. I have invited them to contribute to a collaborative writing project for this year’s pastoral letter as a first step to our synodal pilgrimage towards “building a fraternal world through education, evangelization and the promotion of justice”.²

2 Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2022. Rome, *Circular 478: Documents of the 46th General Chapter*, p. 22.





A Journey of Shared Transformation

No one can face life in isolation. We need a community that supports and helps us, in which we can help one another to keep looking ahead. How important it is to dream together... By ourselves, we risk seeing mirages, things that are not there. Dreams, on the other hand, are built together.³

These words from Pope Francis remind us of a foundational truth for the Lasallian Mission: education is not an isolated act but a communal one. It is not enough to transfer knowledge from one person to another; instead, we must create spaces where learning and transformation happen collectively, fostering shared visions of justice, dignity, and inclusion. This approach is especially crucial when working with Indigenous peoples, who have too often been seen as passive recipients of education rather than partners in a mutual process of learning and growth. Indigenous communities, however, offer deep insights into sustainability, spirituality, and the interconnectedness of all life—insights the world urgently needs today.

3 Pope Francis, 2020. *Fratelli Tutti: On Fraternity and Social Friendship*, no. 8.

In today's world, we face global crises such as climate change, inequality, forced migration, and environmental degradation.

Indigenous peoples have long been marginalized, but their spirits have not been diminished. They carry wisdom that can reshape our understanding of these global challenges.

As Lasallians, our mission extends beyond conventional education. It calls us to walk alongside those who are marginalized, acknowledging our own vulnerabilities while engaging in dialogue rooted in mutual learning. It is a good time for the Institute to experience a synodal moment with them as we sit down and learn from their wisdom so we may reconstruct the Lasallian Mission in the spirit of true fraternity and full partnership.

School for Street
Children in
Madagascar:
Hanita Centre.



The preferential option for the poor is central to the Lasallian Mission, guiding us to stand with those in the peripheries of our society. For Indigenous peoples, these peripheries are both literal and metaphorical—having been physically displaced and marginalized in terms of power and voice. Colonization, globalization, and modern economic systems have threatened their cultural identities, traditions, and languages. Yet, despite these challenges, Indigenous peoples have preserved their spiritual traditions and knowledge, offering invaluable guidance for living in harmony with the Earth.

Education for Lasallians is a two-way process: it is not just about imparting knowledge but also about receiving wisdom from those we serve. With their understanding of the relationship between humanity and nature, Indigenous communities challenge us to rethink dominant paradigms of consumerism and individualism. Their emphasis on community, reciprocity, and respect for the Earth aligns with the message of *Laudato si'*, which calls for an “integral ecology” that recognizes the well-being of the planet as inseparable from the well-being of its people⁴

Pope Francis speaks of a “culture of encounter”—a call to engage in relationships marked by dialogue, humility, and openness. In our work with Indigenous peoples, this concept is especially important. Too often, Indigenous communities have been treated as objects of charity rather than as dialogue partners. This perspective must change. Indigenous peoples, as stewards of the land, hold practices of sustainability and balance that modern society

⁴ Pope Francis, 2015. *Laudato si': On Care for Our Common Home*, no. 49.



Lasallian education emphasizes a deep respect for creation.

urgently needs. These are not merely ecological principles but spiritual ones, rooted in a worldview that sees the Earth as sacred and emphasizes profound respect for the Creator.

The Lasallian charism calls us to accompaniment, walking with those who are marginalized, not as benefactors, but as true companions. This means that education becomes a reciprocal process, where the educator is also a learner. The Declaration on the Lasallian Educational Mission emphasizes the importance of serving the poor and excluded, but also acknowledges that those we serve bring unique gifts and perspectives. Indigenous peoples, in particular, offer cultural and spiritual traditions that deepen our understanding of justice, community, and sustainability. Their worldview offers a powerful

counter to the fragmented, consumption-driven ethos that dominates much of modern life.

The culture of encounter is a call to enter into relationships marked by dialogue, humility and openness.

Mutual learning is at the heart of our mission. We must move beyond hierarchical education models where knowledge flows only in one direction—from teacher to student. Instead, we must create environments where learning is collaborative and transformative, celebrating and integrating indigenous wisdom into our educational practices. This is the kind of solidarity that must guide our interactions with Indigenous peoples.

We are not just educators—we are co-creators of a future where indigenous voices are central to the conversation on justice and sustainability.





As Lasallians, our mission is to transform society by addressing systemic injustices and fostering communities where all can thrive. In our encounters with Indigenous peoples, we are changed as much as they are. Their wisdom challenges us to rethink our values, question systems of inequality, and imagine new ways of living where we honor the dignity of every person and the sacredness of creation.





II Unlocking Closed Doors

The smell of garbage hits you as soon as you get out of the car. You are overwhelmed by the misery and filth you see around you. Locked up in a hellhole, the Roma camp in Scampia is a slum with a population of around 500 persons in the middle of Italian territory. The first time I visited, my spirit and heart ached. I felt an intense sense of indignation towards myself for ignoring the plight of these brothers and sisters of mine. I was angry at the state for not carrying out its constitutional duty and for not adhering to the Convention of the Rights of Children, to which the state is a signatory. I was mad at the Church for not recognizing Jesus among the poor and for not doing enough for those who are suffering and far from salvation.

I didn't impute anything to God, but to myself, to us. I did! These people have escaped the Romani holocaust and survived multiple crimes against humanity and sexual violence even before they arrived in Italy. They have been forced to the peripheries—places that are not just isolated but also unsanitary, inhumane, and concealed from public view. “What the eye doesn't see, the heart cannot grieve”, so we say.

Their rights have been denied by the State, their existence pushed to oblivion, but they have kept

their dignity and self-respect. Their inexhaustible vitality shines especially through the children's cheerful invitation as they take you by the hand and pull you to join their circle so you may share in their laughter.

Life bursts forth where you least expect it...always!

From the mouths of children and of babies, you are led from a hellhole to the hidden beauty and joy of life!

Five years ago, on May 10, a law enforcement team brought bulldozers to the camp to remove shacks made mostly from flimsy materials salvaged from garbage dumps. We wanted to apologize for the actions taken by the municipal officers, but the displaced families reassured us, "Don't worry, the Lord will provide!" In between the melee, I saw a bottle of fresh water offered to a police officer in riot gear.









III One Step Leads to Another

During my early education in a Lasallian school, I was allowed to represent my *alma mater* in the annual National Lasallian Leaders Convention (NLLC) organized by the *La Salle Centre* in Ipoh, Malaysia. As part of the national convention, we were required to go for an exposure program. It is organized as a short visit or a stay-in group experience with marginalized communities to learn about their conditions, experience their way of life, and understand how and why the problems they face persist in society today.

The delegation from my school had an exposure to an estate community. We were warmly welcomed by the community who freely shared their stories. I was greatly disturbed, though, when I learned of the daily struggles of a family living in a small home quartered to fit eight individuals, including a family who had a child with Down's Syndrome. Electricity and water were rationed and available only at specified times of the day. But I was also amazed that despite the challenges, these communities never give up and continue to strive and persevere. Since then, I have become sensitive to situations of injustice and marginalization. The national convention was the starting point of my journey to uphold human rights and dignity.

I continued to be exposed to different realities and had the chance to join initiatives that respond to critical issues faced by marginalized, poor, and oppressed groups.

La Salle Centre provided me with the formation to be immersed with the communities in the peripheries. It was during that time that I had the opportunity to be exposed to the plight of Indigenous peoples.

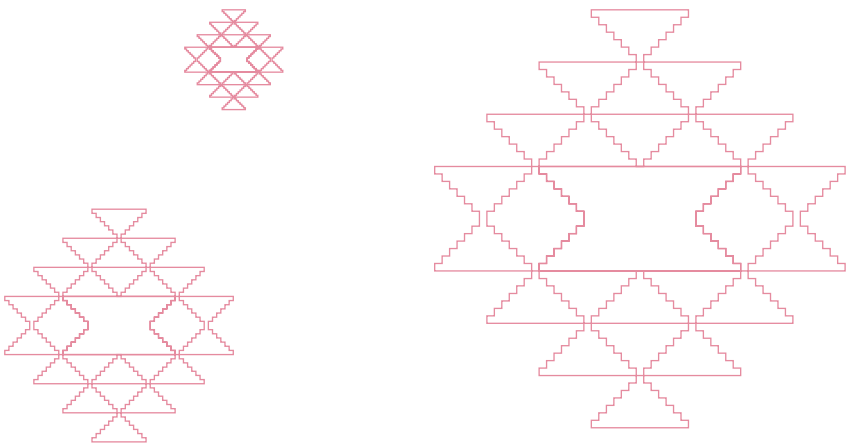
One key objective we identified was to nurture and provide a culture-based education for Indigenous communities. Before conducting the training, we were required to consult the communities so they could identify their needs. It was only after the consultation that we developed specific modules that would respond to their realities and needs. Our team was constantly reminded not to impose our own notions of development and not to push for what we believe are the right solutions but instead to trust and respect the community's insights and ideas.

Those formative years influenced my worldviews to be more conscious and respectful of cultural diversity. It also paved the way towards a life choice to work in a human rights organization that supports Indigenous peoples in their struggles to uphold their dignity and basic rights.

Working with this human rights organization opened the doors to the other Indigenous communities in Peninsular Malaysia. We would take a supportive role in the struggles of these communities while their leaders would be at the forefront of advocating their ancestral rights. We sought to empower their communities by providing the necessary knowledge and skills that would benefit their advocacy. We consulted with them regularly since we respected

and recognized that they are the right-holders of the issues they champion. We had to keep these principles in mind because this is the only way to help them dismantle those same structures that allow injustice and oppression to persist.

Indigenous communities have been systematically oppressed and pushed to the peripheries, if not enslaved or decimated, as part of the policies that were prevalent during the era of colonization. We have a duty today to contribute our share in decolonizing the existing structures that continue to disadvantage them. To this extent, I will always remember the fundamental values imparted to me throughout my Lasallian formation: to be of service to the last, the lost, and the least.







IV Games that Children Play

In the province of the lakes, Imbabura, Ecuador, lies the small town of Atuntaqui, home to a rich mix of indigenous and mestizo traditions. Here, life revolves around textiles. Nearby is Otavalo, an indigenous town, a meeting place for traders and travelers from distant lands. They are known for their art and culture, which maintain a deep respect for nature and ancestral traditions. As time passed, the need for a formal and modern education became undeniable.

I grew up sharing a classroom with an occasional indigenous child. It is easy to recognize them since Otavaleño men wear long black hair, traditionally gathered in a braid, a symbol of pride and respect for their roots. They wear a white cotton shirt, a dark blue or black woolen poncho, white pants, and canvas espadrilles.

While most of the other students wore the school uniform, Luis, my Otavaleño classmate, would show up in his traditional attire. We posed many questions as children do with things they are unfamiliar with. Annoyed by our inquisitiveness, he tried one time to get rid of us by suggesting that we ask his mom instead. When we got the chance to do so, his mom proudly explained how important these were to their people.

On several occasions, our teachers also reinforced the value of respecting cultural expressions.

Luis' music teacher was familiar with the Otavaleño culture and made every effort to speak to him using familiar expressions in his vernacular, *Kichwa*. He encouraged Luis to hone the artistic traditions he grew up with. I can better appreciate the impact of his teacher's encouragement when I watch Luis today, showing his musical talent as he performs before different audiences abroad.

As we became more familiar with each other in school, our differences became more noticeable. In one emotionally charged soccer game, racist comments were uttered, and this alerted the school community to the risks ahead if the situation remains unresolved. Precautions were taken and a dialogue was initiated in the school community. The happy fruit of those meetings brought about a greater recognition that despite our cultural differences, all the students and their families share the same dream to benefit from a good education, improve their lives, and become productive citizens of the community.

In school, I also met other Indigenous classmates, some of whom would decide later on in their teenage years to cut their distinctive braid or set aside their native roots. I realized then that apart from what we learned from books, we need to learn about our land and our people's traditions as our identity and values are rooted in them. Those who have a firm grounding in their cultural traditions and values are not lost even as they navigate the modern world and interact with other cultures. I have much to be grateful for when I look back at my school experience and learn in the process that real education and true progress does not mean

Despite our cultural differences, all students and their families share the same dream of benefiting from a good education.

abandoning the old for the new but discovering a way to grow both roots and wings.







Heroes through Adversity

In spite of incredible risks, Indigenous peoples continue to defend their ways of life, their communities, and the lands and forests all humanity depends on.⁵

This is how the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous peoples describes the continuing struggles experienced by Indigenous peoples worldwide.

Indigenous peoples have distinct social, cultural, economic, and political characteristics, but they share similar challenges, such as encroachment on their ancestral domain, cultural genocide, discrimination, and marginalization. In Peninsular Malaysia, for example, the Indigenous peoples continue to experience hardships where extensive land development has led to the destruction of their ancestral lands and the erosion of their traditional ways of life. These are just representative examples of the numerous challenges and threats they experience even today. But, in the face of hardships and tragedies, the Indigenous peoples have not given up. They continue to find a way forward for themselves and for their communities.

⁵ Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, 2018. *A letter from the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous peoples to World Leaders*, 2018 August 29. <https://unipd-centrodirittiumani.it/en/news/A-letter-from-the-UN-Special-Rapporteur-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples-to-world-leaders/4697>

These communities draw upon their deep reservoir of strength and resilience to overcome the challenges they experience—ever relying on their strong connectedness with all of creation: the ancestral land and the surrounding environment, their knowledge and traditions, and their community as well.

They believe that all of creation—human beings, plants and animals, the land, water, and air are interconnected with each other. They are convinced that the integrity of all of creation guides their communities towards greater responsibility and accountability as stewards of creation. They adopt suitable and non-violent approaches to maintain a harmonious relationship with all creatures. They have a worldview that inculcates cooperation and a community spirit, and as such, they feel a strong sense of obligation to take care of each other, support one another in times of need, and promote constructive adaptation in times of adversity.

These insights were validated in my research findings as I worked closely with the Semai Indigenous peoples in Malaysia. I discovered in the process some key factors contributing to their community's resilience. It was an attempt to decontextualize what we always assumed as a universal approach in addressing the needs of people, even while recognizing that they come from different cultures and contexts. This approach helped me understand better the distinct identities and cultures of Indigenous peoples and make sense of the essential role their unique context plays in shaping their worldviews and perspectives.







W Around the Family Hearth

The Bríbri and Cabécares Aboriginal People live in Amubri, Telamaca, one of seven provinces in Costa Rica. Their rich cultural heritage regards education as a priority. Before the arrival of missionaries in 1930, the education of children was done around the family hearth by grandparents who passed on useful life skills to the young: starting a fire, working the land, planting, and other survival skills. When the pioneer missionaries introduced literacy programs, the residents of Amburi were among the first to embrace it. The Amburi school was established as a pioneer in education in the area, thanks to the efforts of a community of religious Sisters. By the 1980s, the educational system introduced new policies that impacted indigenous education with several innovative programs for intercultural bilingual education in public universities. In 1990, the Indigenous Education Support Council was created.

While such state policies and programs benefited the Indigenous communities, these advances came at a cost, and there are many challenges yet to be addressed. Local universities were not sufficiently equipped to manage these policy changes and program offerings were extremely limited. Indigenous teachers could not earn credentials for a bachelor's degree and Indigenous students needed additional support after they gained access to university

programs. Although education is provided for free, other factors prevent students from availing of such programs. Their villages are remote, and transport facilities are in poor condition.

There are no educators trained to teach in the local languages and using Spanish as a medium of instruction brings with it the risk of adversely affecting their cultural identity.

Furthermore, when an Indigenous student finishes with a university degree, the chances of returning to his or her community is less likely. There are still many challenges to resolve and issues to address.









VII

Stories Untold

As I listened to an ancient story and participated in a welcome ritual of a gathering of Indigenous communities in the Philippines, I thought of the Great Creator who, after the creation of the universe, whispered a story in our ears and commanded, “pass it on”.

When we fail to share God’s story, we suppress the Good News. When our education system fails to pass on the stories of our Indigenous communities from one generation to the next, we cause the death not just of an Indigenous community, but of the whole nation. Cut off from our roots, we lose our identity.



The Great Storyteller has given us the responsibility to share, enrich and relive those stories from the beginning of time. We are all richly blessed when we learn from indigenous knowledge developed through the centuries, when indigenous attire is not just a costume, when indigenous dance is not merely for entertainment, and when the ritual slaughtering of an animal is not another outdated act of violence but a profound acknowledgment of the communion we share with all living beings.

When I joined the Philippine Department of Education, I realized that perhaps, unwittingly, the very education system that was created to provide quality education for all was one of the instruments that caused the obliteration of indigenous knowledge. I offered my sincere apologies to the elders and stewards of our Indigenous communities in the country on behalf of my predecessors in the Education Department and the Philippine government. In asking for forgiveness, we now have the chance to heal the past and reconnect with our native roots.



The stewards of indigenous knowledge—whether in music, cuisine, language, or herbal medicine—should be acknowledged, honored, and celebrated. But we must not end there. The stories and lessons from our forebears must now become part of our national patrimony and find a way to be integrated into our educational system.







A Letter Written not in Ink

“Write me tree in cursive, Riko.”

This is the simple request by eight-year-old Batista as he hands me a green chalk, perhaps found in the garbage. There are no desks, chairs, or blackboards; we only have a gray concrete cast by the side of the road where we can write. I kneel down and write in the best cursive I can—chalk helps a lot—the required word. Without wasting even a minute, Batista, with all the effort of his heart and mind, kneels down and copies my letters one by one. Nothing seems to distract him: not the shouts of the other children playing soccer, nor the running and strength tests of the teenagers nearby, nor the cadenced rhythm of the girls jumping rope... nothing distracts him from his desire to write and write in cursive!

The result satisfies him; he pulls me by my T-shirt to make me observe him well and maybe even correct him. He gets the attention of a few more of us adults than a few of his friends, skeptical at first that he can write on the road or be able to learn. He wants to show everyone he can write in cursive; he is delighted, and his infectious joy calls out to other kids. “Write leaf!” Rightly, there is no tree without leaves... and the word also appears on the concrete, and he carefully and eagerly copies and chisels his



leaf. “Flower! Write flower in cursive!” The seasons have their rhythm, and I simply go along with them: I write flower. Batista makes it his own and almost carves it on the gray cast with purple chalk. The other kids also copy the written words in their own style—more or less decipherable—using different chalk colors that were available.

Perhaps the colored script has a power that only children can see and understand. Perhaps they see magic and imagine a lush forest rising in place of the drab concrete. We are in a noxious place where these Romani families, with a population of more than 500 persons, are crammed and hidden from the public view. In front of the camp, there is a biogas plant that raises concerns on public health of the residents nearby. In this environment, the most fragrant and beautiful flower are the Romani children—dirty, barefoot, naked or clad in tattered clothes but who understand perfectly well what John Baptist de La Salle discovered in his life’s journey:

“a man who can read and write and do arithmetic can do everything in life”.

They have no classrooms, except the outdoor space in front of the camp. They have no desks or chairs, but

they can sit comfortably on the ground. They have no books or notepads, but they have paved roads and concrete walls to write on for their lessons. The marks they leave behind may be easily erased by wind and rain, but their lessons will remain in their minds and hearts.

Amid the deafening silence of society's apathy, they assert that education is their right. They insist on their ability to read, write, count, draw, color, create and invent. Nothing can stop or dampen their thirst to learn and hunger to communicate.

The Italian social activist and popular educator Danilo Dolci, contends:

The greatest oppression is exercised on those who are mute; if the people do not come to possess speech, in spite of everything, they will continue to be manipulated.

Batista and his little friends have understood this: until they can read and write, they are destined for a subhuman life of hardship without a future. They repudiate the deprivation and hazards they were born into and have chosen to create their own future.

But like scribbling on sand, Batista may need to repeat his message and write a thousand times until society listens and prejudice ceases. Batista may need to keep rewriting his claim to the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:6, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they shall be satiated."

Just very recently, Batista and his little friends have come closer to their dream: they are now in school! After more than ten years of making thousands of small steps, months of endless meetings, and much

patience in navigating through the bureaucracy, 70 Romani children are now enrolled for the first time in a regular school.

Clad in their clean school wear and carrying personalized backpacks filled with school supplies, Batista and his little friends are now officially listed as students in the Italian public school system. They attend regular classes with other children, experience the daily adventure of school life, and share in the games and laughter at the school's playground. They may need some time before they can get used to their daily timetable but the Lasallian volunteers are up early every morning for a wake-up call and brisk walk to school.









IX

Keep the Fire Burning

Every year, Australians celebrate the culture and achievements of the First Nation Peoples. This year, our theme was “Keep the Fire Burning! Black, Loud, and Proud”. For this year’s celebrations and liturgies, we were taught how to use fire sticks. These were a special type of wood that kept embers burning for weeks on end. This was used in the old days when communities traveled from one place to another. For our students, it is a reminder that it is their responsibility to keep their culture alive and burning, as well as the pride they have in their culture. For the Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff, it is a reminder to develop a school environment that is inclusive and mindful of the Indigenous peoples.

Reconciliation is a major theme in these celebrations. The grandparents of our students are part of the generation who were forcibly separated from their parents and brought to dormitories by the Church. They were only allowed to see their parents once a year. In those schools, their language and culture were actively marginalized. It is noticeable that those retelling these stories did not have anger and bitterness in their tone but rather a genuine interest to be heard so that both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people can work towards reconciliation together.



In 1984, Luernpa Catholic School was started at the request of the local community. This was an opportunity to start anew. The De La Salle Brothers and Mercy Sisters lead this endeavor. The school was based on the Two-Way Learning Approach, which aims to use the way of learning based on the language and cultural experience of children in the community and the way of learning from the wider Australian community. In this way, students can benefit from the best of both worlds.

Reconciliation through Education requires active discernment, recognition of the value, and appreciation of indigenous culture and knowledge;

if not, English and mainstream learning approaches will marginalize local language, culture, and learning. An example of how the school does this is On Country trips, where Community elders share with students the Dreaming Stories of Creation, and students use their community learning to look for bush food. In the days after those On Country trips, in-class children would write the story of

their trip in both their indigenous language and in English.

Religious Education has a great opportunity for Reconciliation through Education. The Creation Stories of the Creator Spirit and the Christian stories complement each other. School masses all use the liturgy of the Land of the Holy Spirit, which is mostly in the local indigenous language and was developed in this region as a creative response to the language and culture of Indigenous peoples. It is one of the few approved indigenous liturgies for the Eucharist worldwide.



A significant part of the school's story of Reconciliation through Education is the contribution of Lasallian volunteers. These are young people who completed their school education and then spend one year at Balgo volunteering in classrooms to support students' learning and through works of service. These volunteers provide affirming interaction for our students, with them as their big brothers and big sisters.

The Lasallian volunteers become ambassadors of reconciliation, when they return at the end of the year to their families and friends.

When I was first in Balgo, children arriving to start school as 4-year-olds had minimal contact, if any, with English. Some were baffled when they discovered that their non-Indigenous teacher did not understand the local language because, for the children, it was the language of their world. Today, these children now speak a lot more English in their casual conversations. The role of Reconciliation through Education becomes increasingly important to ensure that community language, culture and learning have a prominent role in school learning.









X Excluded

It is not unusual to meet Grade 4 and 5 students who have a Grade 2 reading level here in the reservation. After the pandemic, I now have students who do not even know their letters. There are many more who do not even come to school.

If Indigenous people are in the periphery, the Blackfeet people are in the periphery of the peripheries.

One of my students, whom we shall call Thomas, came to me as a Grade 4 student who could not identify all his letters. He had a chaotic background: prenatal drug exposure, parental addiction, homelessness, foster care, extreme chronic absenteeism, and, I suspect, frequent physical abuse. Thus, he had several behavioral problems like impulse control, disruption, bullying, fighting, and refusal to work. Despite all these, he thrived on relationships, and he learned fast. He even scored the highest in our standardized tests when the questions were read out to him. Despite his potential, he was a bomb waiting to go off.

Society has failed Thomas. He came from a long line of abuse, starting from structures that worked to dismantle the Blackfeet language and traditions that also dismantled his family and community. Healing here in the Blackfeet community has begun.

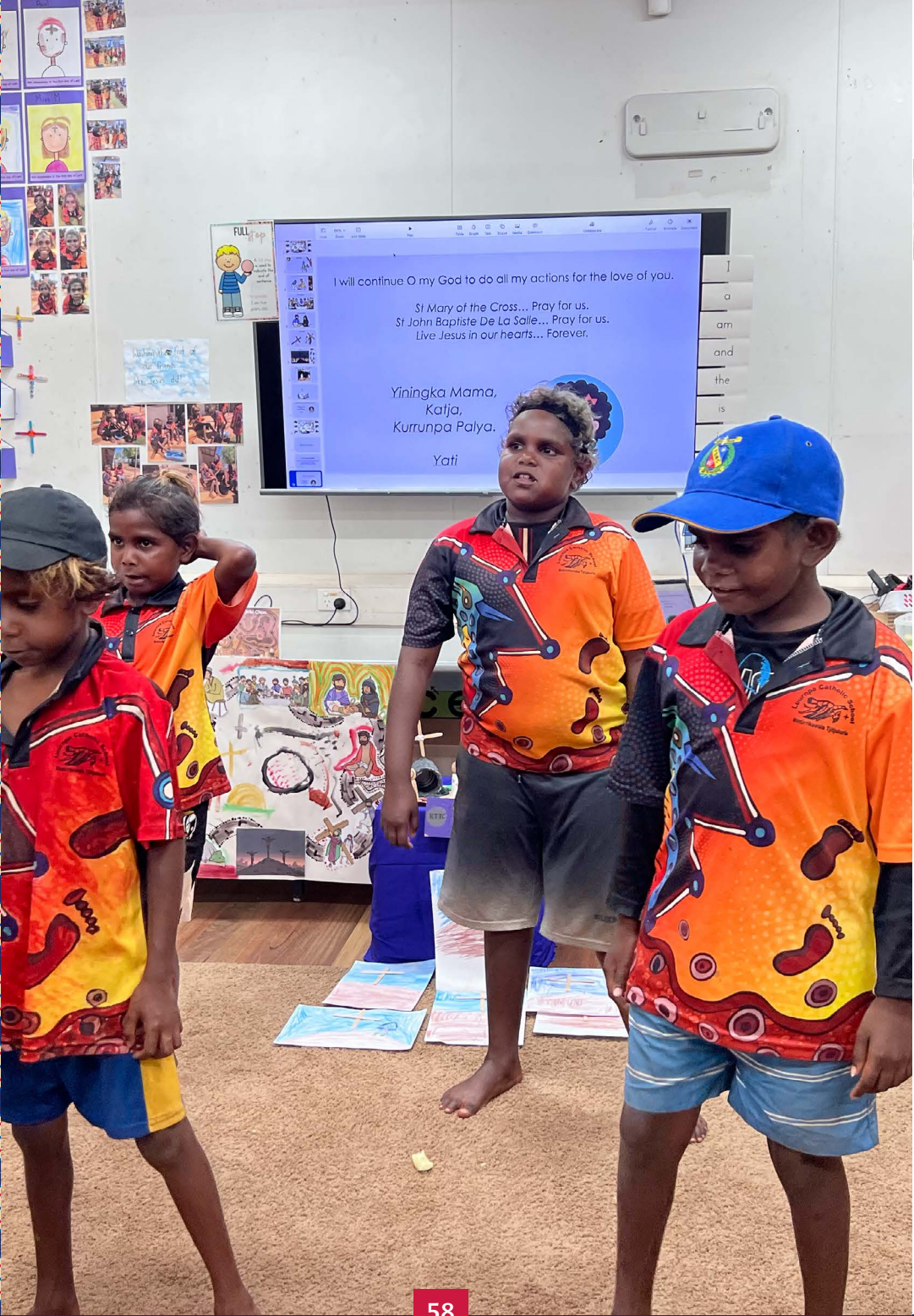
It is the adults who are leading the way to recover what is theirs and help children like Thomas get on their feet.

Eventually, Thomas had to be let go of in our school. In some ways, it is a relief, and it will allow his teachers to focus on other children who have similar problems. Yet, the idea of letting one child go for the benefit of many somehow feels like Caiaphas sacrificing Jesus.

I find myself thinking of ways we could have done better. I hope Thomas overcomes his problems, and I pray for forgiveness for my shortcomings. If he reapplies again, I will advocate for his acceptance. I occasionally see him at powwows, and he runs away, both laughing and embarrassed. I hope to do better, both for Thomas and other children like him.







I will continue O my God to do all my actions for the love of you.

St Mary of the Cross... Pray for us.
St John Baptiste De La Salle... Pray for us.
Live Jesus in our hearts... Forever.

Yiningka Mama,
Kaija,
Kurrunpa Palya.

Yati



XI Whose Outback?

Having worked as a missionary in Papua New Guinea for ten years, I thought adjusting to Balgo Hills in Western Australia would be easier. I could not have been more wrong. On my first day of teaching, I realized that my teaching style was ineffective. Through the help of my fellow Brothers, co-teachers, and Aboriginal teacher assistants, I learned of a better teaching approach.

One of the biggest realizations I had was that the mainstream curriculum in Australia has the potential to marginalize our students. Often unintentional, these marginalizing forces through education are not dramatic; they can even be invisible because they appear normal and acceptable to mainstream education. Over the years, I grew to understand how strange, foreign, and distant the typical English mainstream learning was from the students' context. The challenge is how to approach education from the learning perspective of our students in Balgo.

I was once reading a story about the Outback to my students. One student asked me where the Outback was. I wanted then to respond that we were in the Outback! It was then that I realized that to my students, they were not in the Outback, but rather, in the center and not at all in a remote location.

The mainstream education system can unknowingly devalue the community learning experience of the students and create classrooms that are distant from the lived reality of the children, pushing them to the peripheries of their learning potential.


There is a need to appreciate and value the learning perspective of the children.

If we did not center our teaching and learning approach on their indigenous perspective, then we are at risk of being part of a marginalizing impact on their education.









XIII

Not an object of study

Being a non-Indigenous scholar and educator studying indigenous issues, we are often viewed to be in a “privileged position”. The Indigenous peoples have been the “objects” of research throughout history, and these communities have developed good reasons to be skeptical of non-Indigenous scholars in the field of indigenous studies. This is because non-Indigenous scholars and researchers are often placed in a position of power, imposing their own worldviews and frameworks to understand these communities, disregarding the Indigenous people’s perspectives and worldviews.

My exposure to research as an undergraduate and later on a postgraduate student has largely been of mainstream psychopedagogy. Like many psychology students, I entered the field expecting that studying psychology would help me better understand myself and my community. I would often apply mainstream psychology knowledge in my practice as a psychologist. However, as I continued to deal with different people from various communities and backgrounds, I realized that something did not “fit”. I felt that the ways in which I perceive and understand psychology were only applicable to a certain section of the community, primarily the most Westernized society. Moreover, the general understanding of mainstream psychology does not address the needs

of marginalized communities such as the Indigenous peoples.

The tension of “cultural misfit” appeared in my role as a researcher as well as a Lasallian who was called to uphold human dignity and rights. Having been engaged with Indigenous communities during my schooling days in a Lasallian school taught me to be sensitive to the plight of others, especially those who are excluded and considered irrelevant. It has called me to respond to the needs of these communities, moving from the imposition of our own notions of development and solutions to appreciating the unique traditional cultures and contexts of these communities.

I have learned to advocate for the need to learn and be enriched by indigenous knowledge and wisdom, highlighting the importance of “indigenous perspectives” and decolonizing approaches in responding to their needs.

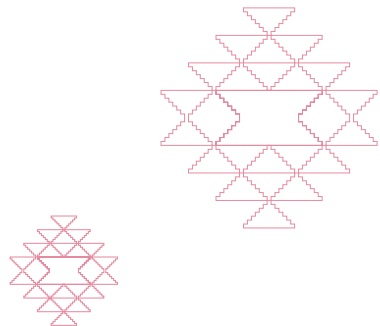
This change of perspective is a game-changer for those into academic writings and publications. In my case, this gave me the opportunity to influence SEAIP ⁶ to conduct Indigenous and culturally relevant research and eventually widen the conceptual space in global psychological research. The regional conference subsequently included under-represented psychologists from less-developed Southeast Asian countries so they could amplify their voices toward equitable global psychology.

⁶ The Southeast Asian Indigenous Psychology (SEAIP) network aspires to annually gather scholars from around the world to empower local psychologists in the region so they could conduct research that is both Indigenous and culturally relevant.

In my region, participation and support for organizations such as the IACCP⁷ provide an opportunity to incorporate the same indigenous perspective in their area of study. This could contribute to our goal of decolonizing the predominant educational framework and guiding people to be more sensitive, understanding, and sympathetic to indigenous perspectives and historical experiences.

Though the actions are small, as a non-Indigenous researcher, educator, and Lasallian, the small actions taken could create a ripple.

Supporting these communities is not just a nice thing to do but, instead, an obligation that all of us as human beings must do to preserve their culture, tradition, and dignity.



7 International Association for Cross-Cultural Psychology (IACCP) holds an annual Culture and Psychology Summer School which provides a research intensive and interactive experience for participants from various universities to learn from one another and to receive specialized training from experts in different fields that incorporate culture in their study of psychology.





XIII Spirituality and Synodality

When dealing with Indigenous communities, Latin American reality has shown that the central element, the hermeneutic key to understanding them, is spirituality. This is not a mere dimension of reality but the primordial element and root of all cosmovision and feel-thinking of Indigenous peoples. Indeed, if it were possible to make a comparison, spirituality is the science of the Indigenous peoples: everything is understood and explained from there. To assume, then, that it is an appendix or to belittle it for its subjectivity is to fail to understand the fundamental role it represents.

Thus, while spirituality is the basis of knowledge, of government, and, in general, of the management and administration of reality, it must be clear that the world is not a univocal and uniform reality. In fact, it is quite the opposite, it is an ordered coexistence of different worlds, not as an artificial juxtaposition or overlapping but as a genuine harmonious, integral and interdependent coexistence. Consequently, to know the world is to understand the interconnectedness of these worlds and the existing correlation between them and the beings that inhabit them.

The use of resources, for example, has an impact on all worlds and requires a series of protocols,

including asking permission from beings and spirits, following rituals for collection and use, and replacing or compensating for resources. Disease, famine, ignorance, and social disorder are expected consequences of poor resource management and, therefore, also of poor governance. This perspective could help us understand better our current global problems from the lens of integral ecology and the certainty that everything is interlinked, and that beyond individuality and independence, interdependence and co-responsibility are higher values.

In its eagerness to create a reflection of itself in the other worlds with which it has come into contact, the colonizing perspective has ignored and disregarded the rich cultural diversity it has encountered. Thus, while it celebrates and flaunts it as a heroic endeavor, its ethnocentric stance has wiped out countless peoples, uprooting them from their ancestral traditions.

That is why the main challenge and task of working with Indigenous communities is to know how to listen to and learn from these peoples: “to know how to sit down”.

Knowing how to sit down means, on the one hand, understanding one’s own place, occupying the space of the one who sees and listens, not waiting for one’s turn to speak, but making a genuine effort to empathize with others and their ideas. It is, therefore, a matter of paying close attention in order to grasp and understand the environment as much as possible.

On the other hand, far from any asymmetrical relationship, it is a matter of knowing how to be a peer of the Indigenous, in the mutual consideration of the dignity that is common to all of us, and in



recognition of their cosmovision, feel-thinking, and knowledge as equally valid. In short, sitting down is an internal disposition to weave knowledge together. This is the ethical base of any relationship since all beings are to be listened and given full attention.

For the Indigenous peoples of the Amazon, in particular, knowledge must be a function of caring for life; otherwise, it is meaningless.

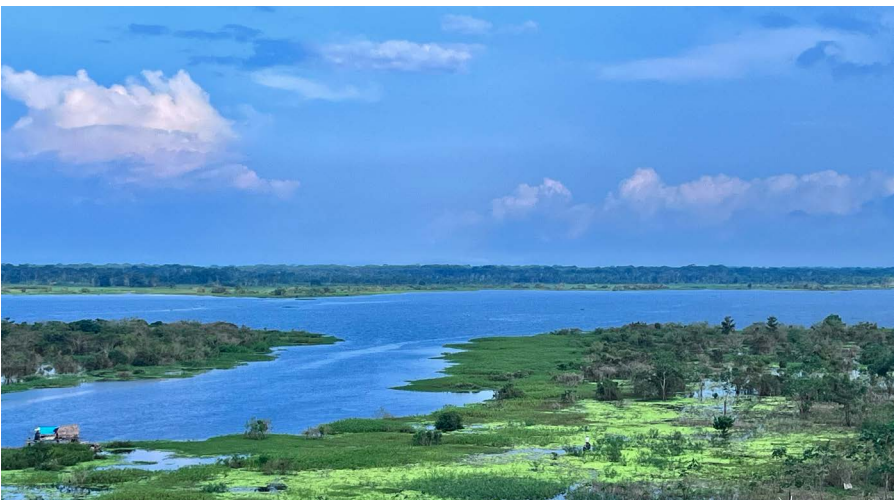
This is not an instrumental but an intentional approach to knowledge, an epistemological criterion: knowledge, and therefore science, is obsolete if it does not revolve around the care of life.

In this sense, indigenous epistemology points out that the knowledge of all parties, when viewed



individually, is incomplete. Consequently, knowledge can only have value when woven from the exchange of multiple particular knowledges, that is, from dialogue. Once again, this implies recognizing that Indigenous peoples have also generated knowledge throughout their history, that this knowledge is as valid as that of the “Western world”, and that one requires the other to complement it. Ultimately, mutual recognition of the validity of knowledge is a *sine qua non* condition for dialogue.

Thus, spirituality and knowing how to sit and weave knowledge are some of the hermeneutical, ethical, and epistemological keys to establishing educational processes that are coherent with and respectful of the Indigenous peoples’ identity. Daring to work with them on educational issues means being willing to learn and understand their knowledge, with total openness and a listening attitude, and only then proposing to weave knowledge together with them. Therein lies, clearly and explicitly, the sole purpose of their entire educational process, the teleology of every educational act, now more urgent than ever: caring for life.







XIV

Drawn to the edges

From the deep South, I had taught in the Boston prison system, Peruvian orphanages, inner-city Detroit, and a Jesuit school on the Pine Ridge Reservation. Nine years ago, when I moved to teach on the Blackfoot reservation, my sister asked if I was drawn to the edges since I had never felt like I belonged anywhere. For some years, I recognized that, yes, I loved not having to try to fit in on the Blackfoot reserve. I have always felt myself socially on the periphery, an oddball. It was refreshing to be expected to be socially and culturally other.

Today, I would answer differently. I actually do belong here now. I don't have to be an Indigenous person to belong here. Sometime in the past, after getting married and bearing two Blackfeet daughters, I realized that the only person still carrying the story of my "not belonging" was myself. I am not an "other" in this community. I am recognized as myself, oddball and all, but welcomed. My whiteness (and oddness) is not erased; it just no longer separates me. I belong without fitting in.

This community teaches me that I am an authentic part of it, that belonging does not require similarity and fraternity does not hinge shared identity. This is the spirit of Blackfeet, upholding my human dignity and welcoming me.

As a white middle-class American, I grew up rootless. My mom is from California, and my dad is from Illinois; they met in New York, and I was born in Alabama. I don't know how many first cousins I had. I remember meeting some of my grandparents but not really knowing them. As a young adult, I longed to grow roots, to live somewhere long enough to plant asparagus, and know I'd be there to harvest it three years later. I converted to the Catholic Church from an active and heartfelt Christian faith, in part because I have grown up utterly ignorant of the time between the Book of Acts and the 95 theses of Martin Luther. The sense of passing on knowledge and tradition and tracing apostolic succession was attractive to me. It gave me hope to have something steadier to stand on than trying to interpret *sola scriptura* through my culturally distorted personal lens 2000 years later. Could a universal and ancient Church give me spiritual rootedness, at least?

The Blackfeet are unique because their reservation is part of their ancestral lands. It is a fraction of the original area, but some traditional Blackfoot sacred sites are here. In a sweat lodge, there are songs to Heart Butte Mountain or Chief Mountain. These are places where their ancestors have prayed for thousands of years. They still go there to fast and pray. These sacred places have special songs and practices associated with them, and perhaps geo-specific spirits who listen and respond to those songs. The Catholic Church is not at all ancient compared to these songs, places, and prayers that go between.

Like becoming Catholic, I am invited in.







Awakened

“Before a dream is realized, the soul of the world tests everything that was learned along the way.”

This quote from Paulo Coelho’s *The Alchemist* resonates deeply with me. It implies that the obstacles faced during a journey are not just hindrances but necessary tests, molding us to be ready for our aspirations. I relate to this because I once thought my dreams would only come true in a faraway place where opportunities were abundant. But over time, I realized that the path to fulfilling my dreams started not outside but within me and in my community. This realization dawned on me when I left our *barrio*⁸, pursuing my goals not as an Indigenous person but simply as a student eager to learn, graduate, and prove my worth. Ironically, it was only after leaving my community that I began to understand its true significance. Who would have thought that stepping away would lead me to cherish where I came from?

The day I received news of my De La Salle Lipa scholarship is etched in my memory. I was overwhelmed with joy, knowing my education would no longer be a financial burden on my parents. At that moment, my dream was simple: study, graduate, and

⁸ *Barrio* is a Filipino term for a rural village or community.

nothing more. As I rode the *habal-habal*⁹ and gazed back at our *barrio*, a mix of emotions swirled inside me—joy for the newfound opportunities, yet sadness for those whom I left behind. I often wondered why many in my community started their own families at such a young age. But my focus was never on the past; for me, the present and future mattered more. Why dwell on yesterday when today holds the key to change? That was my mindset as I prepared for college—determined to return to a stronger, more independent version of myself. Everything felt fresh and optimistic, though perhaps a bit self-centered at the time.

Being part of an Indigenous community, particularly as a young person, is not without challenges. Our cultural identity sometimes feels fragmented, and growing up, I struggled to understand why we were seen as different.

I recall a time when a Tagalog¹⁰ in Mindoro used the phrase “*daw Mangyan ka*”¹¹ to insult a friend. What was once a proper noun had turned into a derogatory label. As a college student, the transition wasn’t easy either. The unfamiliar environment, new faces, and high academic standards left me feeling inadequate. I often believed I was the least knowledgeable in the class, and my lack of confidence only heightened this feeling. Homesickness was another constant companion, but with time, I overcame it.

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- 9** *Habal-habal* is a local term in the Philippines referring to a motorcycle used as a mode of public transport in remote areas where cars or traditional vehicles cannot navigate difficult terrain. It typically involves a passenger riding on the back of a motorcycle operated by a driver, and it is sometimes modified to carry multiple passengers or cargo.
- 10** *Tagalog* is one of the largest ethnolinguistic groups in the Philippines. In this vignette, the Tagalogs are referenced as the predominant ethnic group in the region, illustrating the interactions and occasional tensions between them and the Indigenous communities, which are smaller in number.
- 11** “*Daw Mangyan ka*” may be translated as “You look like or behave like a Mangyan”. *Mangyan* is a collective term for the eight distinct Indigenous communities of the Philippine island of Mindoro.

The Indigenous people College Scholarship and Mentoring Program, supported by the De La Salle Brothers, became a transformative experience. Living at the IP Scholars' House, I met others from various Indigenous communities. Our shared experiences and traditions fostered a strong sense of belonging. I learned that patience and unity are vital in any community and that each decision impacts everyone. Though living together wasn't always easy due to cultural and personality differences, we adapted, realizing the importance of mutual respect. My fellow scholars became like an extended family to me, always there to lift me up.

The people I encountered inside and outside the program made me realize that my life's purpose extends beyond personal success. I was given a rare opportunity both as a scholar and an Indigenous person, and this made me reflect on how diversity is not something that divides us but brings us together. Now, I can share my way of life openly and confidently with those around me.

As my perspectives shifted, so did my dreams. I began to see education not merely as a personal goal but as a means to uplift my community.

As an Indigenous person, I realized that my life purpose should not be self-centered. Instead, my purpose is intertwined with the well-being of the community.

Like Santiago in *The Alchemist*, my journey has been filled with challenges and discoveries, all of which led me to what is truly important. Through reflection, I have met myself and am grateful to the Lord for guiding my path. He placed in my life people who have served as lessons and inspirations—my own King Melchizedek, as in *The Alchemist*. No words can fully express the gratitude I feel for those who have



supported me. They remind me of the bamboo in our backyard, resilient and steadfast, protecting our house from typhoons, bending in the wind but never breaking. The Lasallians who run this program are as strong and humble as that bamboo.

Vice President Leni Robredo used to say,

“ang mga namulat ay ‘di na muling pipikit pa”¹²

These words now resonate with me, thanks to the people who have taught me their meaning. I am one of those who have been awakened, and I will never stop learning. I understand now that my community needs me just as much as I need them. Only by acknowledging this mutual relationship can I fully grasp my identity as an IP—rooted in our ancestral domain, aware, and engaged. I will carry the lessons I have learned back to my community!

12 “Those who have been awakened will never shut their eyes again”.





XVI

Blessed

**Casa Indígena De La Salle
Apartado 10
Huehuetenango, Guatemala
December, 1981**

Dear Bruce and Jane and kids,

Greetings and best wishes for a peaceful and blessed Christmas and New Year. I hope this finds you in good health and in good spirits. I am presently in the States for a short visit with my family and for some routine (I hope!) knee surgery. Please excuse a duplicated letter at this time—it's the only way I can keep up with my correspondence and maintain contact with my many relatives and friends. My first year in Guatemala was a very interesting and rewarding experience, but my many responsibilities there didn't allow me much time for correspondence. Please excuse the delay if you've written during the year.

After nearly ten years of service in Nicaragua and a year and a half in the States, I arrived in Huehuetenango, Guatemala, in early January, 1981. Our community of Brothers there for 1981 consisted of three from the States and three from Guatemala. I had a double assignment from the beginning: teach in our school in Huehuetenango and help direct the

Indian Center (Casa Indígena De La Salle) in the same city. Both assignments were challenging: the former, because I was assigned to teach the history of Guatemalan Art History (I had to become an “expert” overnight!) in addition to several English classes and was given the responsibility for guidance in a school of 900 pupils; the latter, because it meant living and working with 150 Indian boys (grades 7-12) in a boarding school situation with the help of two other Brothers. Besides supervision and counseling, my duties at the Indian Center also included the maintenance of a large building and the responsibility for the small farm (10-12 acres) that is one of the educational projects of the Indian Center (there is also a carpentry shop).

The days were often long and many demands were placed on my time at the Indian Center, but I thoroughly enjoyed my work with the Indian boys. Through my close daily association with them, I have come to respect and love them all and to have a deep respect for the many centuries of Mayan history and tradition that is their cultural heritage.

Guatemala is a beautiful country of mountains, valleys, lakes, lush tropical forests and fertile coastal plains. It is probably one of the most colorful countries in the world. The ancient Mayan modes of dress and customs blend with those of the Spanish conquerors to form a rich panorama of colors, sounds, and special traditions. The Indians still speak their traditional Mayan tongues (seven or eight Indian tongues are spoken among the boys at the Indian Center--Spanish has to be the common language). The Indians are industrious farmers, honest, peace-loving, simple people whose hospitality is proverbial. I always find it a joy to visit the homes of the boys from the Indian Center. The Indians of Guatemala form about 50% of the seven

million-plus population of the country; but they are the poor, the oppressed, the forgotten ones of Guatemala. Many of them are desperately poor, the majority is illiterate and malnutrition and infant mortality are endemic problems.

Our apostolate at the Indian Center has for its principal purpose the formation of educated leaders among the Indian population.

We have hundreds of requests each year from priests, Sisters and village leaders to accept boys from their tours and villages; but we can accept only 150, including those who are already in the six-year high school program. The selection process is difficult, but we try to accept those with the most leadership potential. We ask the families to pay \$12.50 a month for their sons' room and board and schooling, but many can pay only a fraction of that (real costs are \$50 per boy per month). The rest of our funding comes from donations of the Christian Brothers in the United States, the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers and from many generous relatives and friends in the United States and Europe. CARE¹³ provides some rice, wheat flour, cooking oil, etc., each month. God must smile on our venture with those fine lads, because somehow we always manage to receive help from someone just when we need it most.

I can't end this letter without asking for your prayers for Guatemala (and for all of Central America). The level of personal violence there is reaching appalling proportions (murders, tortures, kidnappings, threats, etc.) and the Church is being persecuted

13 CARE was founded in the United States in 1945, when it sent food parcels to Europe. Its name was 'Cooperative for American Remittances to Europe'. As CARE's activities expanded, it was changed to 'Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere'. Translator's note.

because of its option for the poor and oppressed. The Indian population of Guatemala, caught defenseless between the Army and the rebel forces operating in the country, is taking the brunt of this violence. We pray and long for peace and a just solution to Guatemala's many social and economic problems (most of which date from the Conquest in 1524), but until now peace and justice elude us.

Aware of the many difficulties and risks that we face in the future, we continue to work with faith and hope and trust in God's Providence.

Please join your prayers with ours every day. Many selfish, blind and hardened hearts must be converted to the love of Christ before a lasting solution can be found. Armed force will not solve of the problems; only dialogue and mutual understanding can be viable solutions. I am personally weary of violence, but I continue to feel a strong commitment to the suffering poor of Central America. "God's ways are not man's ways," says the Bible. God knows why He continues to call me to Guatemala when some friends and relatives encourage me to pull out for my own comfort and safety. I have been a Christian Brother for nearly, twenty years now, and my commitment to my vocation grows steadily stronger in the context of my work in Central America. I pray to God for the grace and strength to serve Him faithfully by my presence among the poor and oppressed of Guatemala. I place my life in His Providence; I place my trust in Him. I hope you understand my position. The intensity of the past year in Guatemala has come out in this last paragraph. Please pardon so many personal references, but I can't take the situations and experiences of the past year out of a personal context.

I will be enjoying a few weeks of rest and relaxation until January 1st, when I will return to Guatemala. Our school year there begins in mid-January and continues through mid-October. I'll be teaching art history, English and religion next year as well as being back at the Indian Center (I must confess that I already miss the boys after only a month away from them). The first year anywhere is the most difficult. Now that I have roots in Huehuetenango and have the programs at the Indian Center more or less under control, I should have a little more time for myself next year. Among other things, I hope to do a better job at keeping up with my correspondence. So, please take the "risk" and drop me a line during the year. News from friends and relatives is always a welcome encouragement.

I hope that you've had a good year in 1981 and that 1982 brings you even greater happiness and blessings. The peace of Christ be with you always. You are often remembered in my prayers.

With love and prayers,

Jim





Epilogue

Building a fraternal world through education starts with the commitment of one person. The stories and reflections in this pastoral letter are not mere educational reflections; they are testimonies to the power of solidarity and mutual growth. When we walk alongside Indigenous peoples and other marginalized communities, we are not just offering services; we are entering into relationships that challenge us to grow, learn, and embrace new perspectives. The journey begins with me.

Pope Francis
 Unsplash



Pope Francis reminds us that true solidarity is not about temporary solutions but enduring commitments to justice and the common good.¹⁴ As Lasallians, our mission calls us to co-create communities of dignity and respect where every culture is valued, and every voice is heard. In these

¹⁴ Pope Francis, 2020. *Fratelli Tutti: On Fraternity and Social Friendship*, no. 116.



spaces, we are not merely educators but listeners and participants, ensuring that the voices of those who have been silenced guide the path forward.

At the heart of the Lasallian charism is the commitment to trust and reciprocity. Rather than offering preconceived solutions, we engage in shared journeys of understanding.

Indigenous communities, with their spiritual connections to the Creator and their intimate relationship with the land, offer lessons that challenge us to confront the injustices in our world. Their resilience and knowledge inspire us to imagine new possibilities for justice and sustainability in this era of ecological and social crises.

Education, when rooted in genuine engagement, becomes a platform for collective growth, where learning flows in multiple directions, and everyone involved is enriched. Indigenous peoples, through their longstanding stewardship of the Earth and holistic worldview, remind us that the well-being of the planet is inseparable from the well-being of its people. As Lasallians, we are called to integrate these teachings into our educational practices, ensuring our work contributes to social and ecological justice.

Pope Francis's vision for synodality calls for the Church to embrace journeying together – an ongoing process of mutual listening, dialogue, and discernment that involves all members of the People of God. As he explains, “Synodality is much more than ecclesial meetings; it is the specific way of living and operating in the Church as the People of God, which reveals and gives substance to her being as communion when all members actively participate”. This deeply resonates with the communal and inclusive decision-making practices found in many indigenous cultures, where wisdom is drawn from

collective discernment and consensus-building. In these traditions, all voices are valued, especially those of elders and marginalized members of the community. While indigenous decision-making practices exemplify the essence of synodality, these traditions are often strained by the ongoing injustices they endure.



Historical and ongoing injustices – such as forced displacement, resource exploitation, and the marginalization of cultural practices – pose significant challenges to Indigenous peoples as they seek to sustain their traditions and worldviews. These communities often find themselves defending not only their land and resources but also their spiritual and cultural identities from external pressures. For the Church to fully embrace synodality, it must move beyond symbolic gestures and commit to tangible actions that address these systemic barriers.

On the one hand, this involves working alongside Indigenous peoples in their struggles for land rights, cultural preservation, and ecological justice, ensuring that their traditions are not only respected and valued but protected and highlighted. Solidarity in this context means advocating for policies that safeguard Indigenous communities while also amplifying their voices in spaces where decisions affecting their future are made. On the other hand, it is necessary to recognize that Indigenous peoples' experiences, wisdom, knowledge and worldviews have much to teach us. Only if we do so, will it be possible for us to have genuine dialogue, listen to each other, and share and build together.

Indigenous communities are also known for their profound understanding of healing and reconciliation, both within their own communities and with the wider world. Pope Francis, in his address for the World Day of Peace, emphasized that true reconciliation requires a patient and sustained commitment to justice, healing, and transformation. Their focus on reconciliation is not merely about resolving past injustices but is grounded in a spiritual and communal effort to restore harmony.

As the Church embraces synodality, it must recognize that reconciliation with Indigenous peoples is not a one-time event but an ongoing journey of solidarity and shared healing. By engaging in this process, the Church not only learns from indigenous approaches but also actively participates in addressing historical wrongs, walking together toward a more just and compassionate future.

Pope Francis, during his visit to Indigenous communities in Canada, highlighted the need for reconciliation in healing past wounds and building a future of justice and peace.¹⁵ His call for humility, commitment, and the courage to change resonates deeply with our Lasallian values of accompaniment. Our work with Indigenous peoples, like our work with all marginalized communities, is about healing—healing relationships fractured by systemic injustice, healing the wounds of colonization and displacement, and healing the divide between humanity and creation.

As we conclude, the words of Nemonte Nenquimo, a Waorani leader from the Ecuadorian Amazon, offer a powerful reminder:

The Earth does not expect you to save her, she expects you to respect her. And we, as Indigenous peoples, expect the same.¹⁶

¹⁵ Pope Francis, Address to Indigenous peoples and Members of the Parish Community of Sacred Heart Church in Edmonton, Alberta, July 25, 2022. <https://www.catholicregister.org/faith/homilies/item/34635-reconciliation-one-reality-one-soul-one-people>

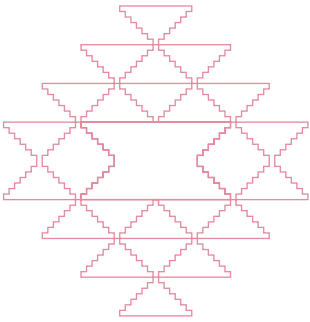
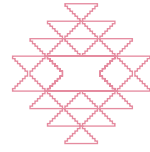
¹⁶ Nemonte Nenquimo. October 12, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/oct/12/western-worldyour-civilisation-killing-life-on-earth-indigenous-amazon-planet>



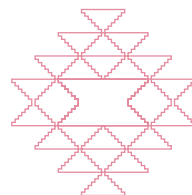
Waorani Leader
 Nemonte Nenquimo
 📷 Mitch Anderson /
 Amazon Frontlines
 © [The Guardian](#)

This call for respect and reciprocity echoes our Lasallian Mission: to walk not in judgment but in humility and mutual respect. Serving others is not about imposing change but about growing together in solidarity. By walking humbly with Indigenous peoples and marginalized communities, we embark on a journey of shared wisdom and collective action.

The path toward justice calls us to embrace solidarity and shared responsibility for one another and the Earth. As Lasallians, we recognize that this journey is not only about social and environmental justice but also about spiritual commitment. Indigenous peoples, with their deep connection to the Creator and the land, remind us of the sacredness of all life. By embracing their wisdom and walking humbly with them, we honor our Lasallian Mission of fostering communities grounded in compassion, equity, and reverence for creation.



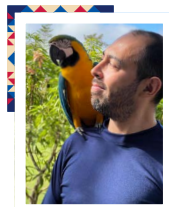
Together,
we can
build a **world**
rooted in justice,
sustainability
and a profound
spiritual commitment
to the ***common good.***



Special thanks

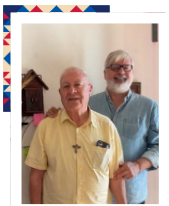
to the Lasallian **collaborating writers** and **translators** of the Pastoral Letter

Collaborating writers



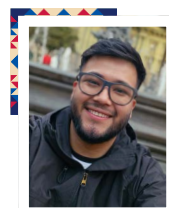
Br. Daniel Niño FSC

Born in Bogotá, Colombia, Br. Daniel Niño is currently based at the De La Salle Community of Tabatinga, Brazil, in the heart of the Amazon for the past three years. In this Leavening Community, young Lasallians and Brothers from Latin America live and work together. Traveling along the Amazon River, they do their Pastoral work with several Indigenous peoples. He holds a master's degree in Archaeology and Biblical Studies.



Br. Enrico Muller FSC

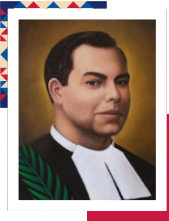
Br. Enrico has been with the Lasallian Community of Scampia together with Br. Raffaele and Simone, a volunteer in his fourth year. Scampia is a neighborhood on the northern outskirts of Naples, Italy where education is not a priority, and the Mafia is very present. The Community lives in a council house among vulnerable people and serves young Neapolitan and Romani children and young people in CasArcobaleno (Rainbow House) and in various Romani camps. With the engagement and assistance of professionals, volunteer religious and Lasallians from many parts of the world, they serve these communities through diversified educational programs and actions.



Br. Jairo Vladimir Reyes FSC

Br. Jairo is an Ecuadorian De La Salle Brother. At 26 years old, he dedicates himself to education and community service. Currently, he works in Istmina, Chocó, Colombia, providing academic support to youth from Afro-descendant and Indigenous communities. He is also part of the Levadura project, supporting Indigenous teachers.

Collaborating writers



Blessed James Miller FSC

Blessed James Miller FSC (1944–1982) was an American Brother of the Christian Schools dedicated to serving the poor and marginalized through education. Born into a farming family in Ellis, Wisconsin, he joined the Christian Brothers in 1959 and later ministered in Nicaragua and Guatemala, transforming schools and building opportunities for Indigenous youth. Despite threats of violence, he remained steadfast in his mission. Martyred in Huehuetenango, Guatemala, on February 13, 1982, he was beatified on December 7, 2019, as a witness to faith and commitment to the Lasallian mission. We republish here a letter he wrote in 1981 while he was working in Guatemala, thanks to Ms. Amy Surak, Director of the Archives and Special Collections at Manhattan University in New York.



Ms. Kelly Hall

Kelly Hall has been a teacher at De La Salle Blackfeet School since 2015. She is the lead teacher for the new Little Flower Academy educational initiative that combines 4th and 5th grade classrooms based on the Montessori model. Kelly first began teaching in 2010 at Mapiya Luta Red Cloud Indian School before spending two years in Detroit from 2013–2015 to teach at the nonprofit Superhero Training Academy. In 2015 took the 4th grade teacher position at De La Salle. She received her M.Ed. in Curriculum and Instruction from Montana State University – Billings in 2018 and served on the De La Salle's interim leadership team during the COVID-19 pandemic. She has also worked in curriculum development across all grades and, particularly, has overseen the transition to standards-based assessment that is currently used in Little Flower Academy at De La Salle.

Special thanks

to the Lasallian **collaborating writers** and **translators** of the Pastoral Letter

Collaborating writers



Br. Lesberth Dimas Borge FSC

Br. Lesberth from the Lasallian sector of Nicaragua is currently assigned in the Leavening ministry “Casa La Salle”. It is in a province located in the Costa Rican Caribbean called Limón. For the past two years he has been supporting the pastoral work of the parish of Santiago the Apostle in Amubri, Diocese of Limón, located in the mountainous system of Talamanca, where majority of the population are from Indigenous communities of the Bribri and Cabecar ethnic groups.



Ms. Me-an Antao

Me-an is currently enrolled at De La Salle Lipa, Philippines, and in her final year of college pursuing a bachelor’s degree in Secondary Education. She is a Buhid Mangyan, an Indigenous community in the island of Mindoro, Philippines. She is a scholar under the Indigenous peoples Scholarship and Mentoring Program of the De La Salle Brothers. Me-An aspires to teach and serve her Indigenous community upon graduation.



Br. Rick Gaffney FSC

Br. Rick lives at Luurnpa Catholic School in the Wirrimanu Aboriginal Community, Balgo Hills, Australia, located on the edge of the Tanami Desert. At the school he is the Coordinator of Religious Education, Lasallian activities and the Educational Engagement Attendance Initiative. While at Luurnpa Catholic School he has completed a PhD investigating how to improve teachers’ understanding of First Nations students’ school learning experiences, which also involved teachers in Papua New Guinea.

Collaborating writers



Mr. Ryan Chua

Ryan is an adjunct lecturer in Monash University Malaysia. He completed his PhD in Psychology at the Jeffrey Cheah School of Medicine and Health Sciences, Monash University Malaysia, examining the psychological resilience mechanisms and processes of the Semai Indigenous communities in Peninsular Malaysia. His research interests include areas related to cross-cultural Psychology.



Br. René Churqui Ortiz FSC

Br. René currently works at the Lasallian Educational Ministry in Pinar del Rio in Puerto Rico. Located in the town of Pando, northern Bolivia, Puerto Rico is home to an Indigenous population of different communities in Bolivia. The ministry provides educational support and services to the Indigenous communities through two educational units that offer kindergarten, primary and secondary programs under an agreement between the Catholic Church and the Bolivian State.



Mr. Rozanno E. Rufino

Butch Rufino is the Convenor of the Indigenous peoples Education Partnership Initiative, supported by the De La Salle Brothers of the Philippines. He is currently a Senior Consultant at the Asian Development Bank. With extensive experience in the development field, he has focused on areas such as basic education, education for sustainable development, Indigenous peoples education and development, and heritage conservation, working across government, civil society, and international development agencies. He studied economics and anthropology at the University of the Philippines Diliman and continues to learn with the Indigenous communities he engages with.

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Translators



Br. Agustín Ranchal FSC

Born in Spain, Br. Agustín has studied Theology, Education, English Linguistics & Literature in Spain and Spirituality in Kenya. He has served as teacher and formator in Spain, Kenya, Ethiopia, and South Sudan. Since the 44th General Chapter in 2007, he has been collaborating with the Institute and the Region RELEM as interpreter and translator. After serving 4 years as translator in the Generalate, Rome, he has just started his ministry as Novice Master in Nairobi, Kenya, in the Lwanga District of Africa, and continues his collaboration with the Institute in translation services.



Br. Antoine Salinas FSC

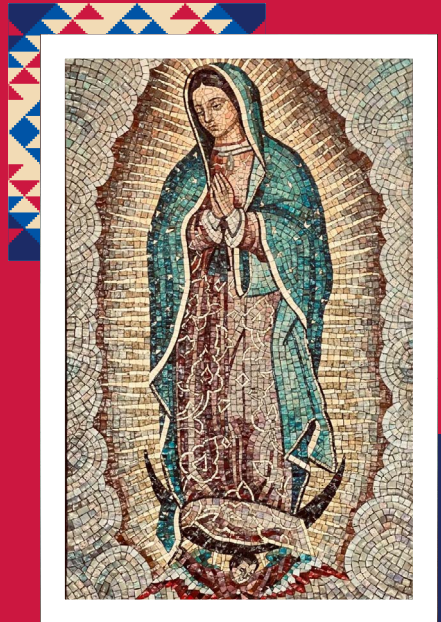
After obtaining his master's degree in English from the University of Caen in Normandy, Br. Antoine taught in Algeria, Tunisia, and Egypt before finishing his professional career in Reims and Lyon in France. When he retired, he agreed to come and work at the Generalate as an English-French translator. He now lives in Reims, where he welcomes pilgrims who come to visit Saint John Baptist de La Salle's birthplace and museum. He continues to provide translation services for Rome.

O Holy Virgin of Guadalupe,

turn your loving gaze
to us as you did to the
Indigenous communities
of the Americas that
our hearts may be
awakened and we may
receive the Good News
of the fruit of your
womb, Jesus.

Bless our Lasallian
educational mission
today that we may
continue to bring the
light of grace especially
to poor youth who are
far from salvation.

Amen.





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