
“An Audacious Journey”: Opening and Closing Messages at the 3rd AIMEL¹

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1. Opening Message of the Superior General

Buongiorno e benvenuti a Roma! Let me speak from the heart and welcome you warmly to your house, our house, the *Casa Generalizia*.

Let me begin by sharing with you a study in contrasts. Look at the portraits of all the Superiors General looking at us through 340 years of the Institute.⁴ They all wear the same religious habit – a black habit with a *rabat*. They all look a little too saintly for us. Then take a look at those around you and see the different colors of the people who are in this room. They don’t even have the same color of hair or the same color of skin. They have different eye shapes and are attired with the different, wonderful colors of the rainbow. Everyone from a different background has come here; very importantly, there are more women than men.

This morning, we were in the Sanctuary of Saint John Baptist de La Salle.⁵ It was another study in contrasts. Before us this morning were the relics of our holy Founder – his dry bones. In that same sanctuary, we gathered with our hopes and dreams, pulsating with energy. We carry in our living hearts the same dream that was once embodied in those dry bones of our holy Founder during his lifetime.

Walk around this building of our *Casa Generalizia* – solid, imposing. Another study in contrasts. Glance at the paintings hanging on its walls. You will see many images and scenes that describe our past: moldy dreams of a glorious past. Then take a look at the people who are walking around these corridors today. Noisy, chaotic, speaking many different languages. Sometimes we understand each other, and at other times we don’t. But our hearts are united as one every time we gather around the same corridors leading to an exciting future.

Lasallian friends, this is what we are harvesting today. A harvest of newness. A new springtime for the Lasallian Family in the world. A harvest of the future. Seeds planted in the past now germinate in the hearts of many different persons and communities that John Baptist de La Salle never knew or imagined. Today we gather, filled with that same spirit, recognizing that the God who called John-Baptist is the same God who calls us today. The God who moved him deeply to leave his comfort zone is the same God who invites us now to enter into a deep experience, a new encounter that will hopefully lead us out of our comfort zones.

There’s much for which to be grateful. There’s much of which to be afraid. But the God we know and who is with us today is a gentle God. And He will lead us one step at a time – *piano piano* – to where He wants us to go. Welcome to an audacious journey! Enjoy the adventure.

2. Closing Message of the Vicar General

Dear Lasallians – Brothers and Partners – Saint John Baptist de La Salle wrote that, “This Institute is of the greatest need.” The situation of abandonment of poor children made a “deep impression” on De La Salle and the first teachers; undoubtedly, they saw in them the face of God.

Today, perhaps, we are not necessary, but we can be immensely significant. Thus, paraphrasing De La Salle, I like to think that this “Institute is of great significance” as long as we continue to find Jesus Christ in the faces of those who suffer.

Poets have the gift of telling bitter stories with beauty and opening eyes while breaking hearts. Eduardo Galeano, a universal Uruguayan, has described those who suffer as “*los nadies*” (the nobodies). And he says:

*The fleas dream of buying themselves a dog, and nobodies dream of escaping poverty ...
The nobodies: nobody's children, owners of nothing.
The nobodies: the no ones, the nobodied, running like rabbits, dying through life,
screwed every which way.
Who are not, but could be.
Who don't speak languages, but dialects.
Who don't have religions, but superstitions.
Who don't create art, but handicrafts.
Who don't have culture, but folklore.
Who are not human beings, but human resources.
Who do not have faces, but arms.
Who do not have names, but numbers.
Who do not appear in the history of the world, but in the police blotter of the local press.
The nobodies, who are not worth the bullet that kills them.*

The 3rd AIMEL has called us to dream and to decide, and also to think about the “nobodies.” We have lived an Assembly in dialogue and openness, sensitive to the contexts. We have visualized the future and tried to foresee the sustainability of the mission. It is an Assembly held after the 46th General Chapter. In the same way, it made efforts to reach out to the entire Lasallian Family, to young people, to IALU,⁶ to the Guadalupana Sisters of De La Salle,⁷ to the Marist Brothers.⁸ The Assembly assumed at the heart of its reflection the Pope's invitations to the “Global Compact on Education”⁹ and *Laudato Si'*.¹⁰ Undoubtedly, the 3rd AIMEL has been a meeting with the aroma of prophecy.

When the “lines of action” were being approved by the Assembly, I could not help but think of the parables of Jesus that speak to us of the small things: like the mustard seed, the birds of the air, the widow's penny, the lost coin, the lost sheep, the sinner who repents, the leaven.

A few days ago, we were blessed to visit the *Fratelli Project* in Lebanon, born of the prophetic decision of two Institutes – Lasallian and Marist – to move forward in the search for joint projects that revitalize our mission, strengthen our bonds, and generate hope. The focus of the

Fratelli Project is the educational accompaniment of Syrian migrants fleeing the terror of war and who are strangers in a foreign land, waiting to be able to put down roots somewhere or to return home one day when the violence that expelled them ceases.

Marists and Lasallians have been present in Lebanon for more than 120 years. The educational quality and social prestige of our schools is recognized and appreciated. Immense schools that count their students by the thousands and their graduates by the tens of thousands. Educational works that have withstood civil wars, political vicissitudes, social and economic crises. They have provided a quality educational service, and created an environment where Christians and Muslims live together in respect and appreciation, despite differences, that in other contexts would be impossible.

The *Fratelli Project* is a fragile presence – presumably temporary. The children and their families are Muslim, poor, as are migrants. They left behind belongings, land, history. Will they be able to return home? Hard to say, quite possibly not. Starting the *Fratelli Project* was an act of hope, of courage, of solidarity, a decision to go to the peripheries and accompany children and young people in critical situations and offer them non-school educational processes: a proposal to strengthen values, help them in reading and writing, languages and mathematics, as well as sports that help build community, and educational stimuli that might allow them to continue successfully in formal school.

The *Fratelli Project* has become a “sign of contradiction” that teaches without using words too much, that questions without violence, that shows paths without forcing. It is an oasis of peace, joy, and faith; in short, a space of significance.

The traditional Marist and Lasallian works in Lebanon looked on with skepticism, bewilderment, and some resentment. The same thing happened with the local Christian Church. The question that was repeated – even today – “why support and serve those who have made war on us and invaded the country? Why serve the ‘enemies’ when there are so many needs among the Lebanese? Why not channel those resources to the Lebanese poor?” All valid questions, which are difficult to answer. The human drama exists and the commandment of love, the heart of Christianity, is to love – even one’s enemies. This is the radical nature of the Gospel.

If in the beginning there was incomprehension and later indifference, it is also true that today acceptance is growing and the same century-old schools are beginning to feel its positive effects and are slowly undergoing processes of conversion, respect and even collaboration.

The *Fratelli Project* has shown us paths of conversion and wonderful spaces to grow, dream, share and serve. It has demanded from us consecration and creativity, commitment and generosity; it has invited us to overcome fears and set out on a journey, to overcome the fear of uncertainty and the inability to take risks. The *Fratelli Project* is an example of how to answer an uncomfortable question, “Where is your brother? Where is your sister?”

In the *Lasallian Conversations*,¹¹ we have been inviting Lasallians to *Proyecto Levadura* [Leavening Project]. It is not a step-by-step guide for implementation. It is not a recipe, it is not make-up as you go, it is not a “change everything so that everything stays the same.” Instead, it

is a movement, a constant search, a prophetic wager, a call to leave our comfort zones and *abandon ourselves into God's hands like the sailor who sets sail without sails or oars.*¹²

The *Fratelli Project* helps us to understand their nature, power, and transforming capacity. Yeast are microorganisms that reproduce in a medium that allows them to do so and has the effect of transforming and growing. The *Fratelli Project* has transformed the lives of migrants, has sown hope in sad children, has shaken the foundations of century-old institutions that are renewing themselves, has generated unions between Brothers and Religious Congregations, has attracted volunteers, *partners* and international support, has made it possible to create Christian community in Muslim contexts.

The *Fratelli Project* has summoned the solidarity of students and families from other countries who come together to support, finance, pray, and be present. Thus, timidly, quietly, simply and without violence, it has generated new dynamics, built alliances, renewed institutions and changed lives. It has given rise to lay vocational processes, has given new meaning to the consecration of our Brothers, has increased the sense of belonging to the Lasallian and Marist Families.

On the other hand, the 3rd AIMEL has outlined for us “lines of action” for the “structures of animation and government,” “formation,” “processes of association,” “vocational culture,” “eradication of poverty and inclusive communities,” “education centered on the Gospel and spiritual accompaniment,” “educational communities for social transformation,” and “vitality of the Lasallian identity.” Certainly, a monumental work. In other words, we have the ingredients; we set out the pathways; we have visualized the horizons. Now we have to put the yeast, knead the dough and prepare the baking: yeast to renew our mission and strengthen our vocation: yeast to give new meaning to life.

Many reasons to be grateful and many people to recognize. Gratitude to the International Council for Lasallian Association and the Educational Mission (CIAMEL), to the Preparatory Commission, to our Institute's Secretariat of Mission and Association, to the Services of the Generalate, to the Lasallian Educational Mission (MEL) Councils of the Districts, and to so many Partners and Brothers who are moved with a passion for the mission and the search for new ways. Thanks to Alisa, Nestor, Fritzie, Paco, Heather, Antxon, Colette, Andres, and many others¹³ who with their hard work here and there, and behind the scenes or in the limelight, made possible a full experience of synodality.

Einstein is credited with having said that, “the path to madness is to believe that things will change by doing the same thing over and over again.” The call that is made to us with anguish is the call to answer a question that hurts and spurs, “*Where is your brother? Where is your sister?*”; and it points us to part of the answer: in the peripheries! which can be geographical but are also existential, political, economic and educational.

The peripheries are on the frontiers of dehumanization, there where “the nobodies” increase, wounds bleed, exclusions swarm; they are where silences cry out, peace is beaten and cowardly war sows horror; they are in the places where we have given up searching, or where we have been overcome by the weariness and abulia produced by existential emptiness; they are also in

our traditional works whose lethargy is killing them by starvation; but, above all, they are where our eyes do not want to look.

De La Salle bequeathed to us a particular way of seeing, being and doing: “The spirit of this Institute is the spirit of faith and ardent zeal.”

Faith, which impels us *to believe* that with our mission we can impact the lives of our students, our Brothers and Lasallian Partners, to believe that education transforms, to believe in humanity, and to believe in the good God who inspires us and constantly calls us to cultivate a deep spirituality that spreads humanism, fraternity and hope. We have to believe that education is and will be the best way, the only non-violent way, to include, to have a political impact, and to open paths to overcome exclusion. Education is, without a doubt, an act of faith and hope, a continuous discernment and an abandonment into the hands of the Lord.

And the *burning zeal* is passion, commitment, and the gift of self to assure peace, justice, equity and the integrity of Creation; that is, to generate educational proposals that strengthen humanity, fraternity, solidarity: sustainable development. And, of course, to create real projects where fraternity in the educational service of the poor is evident and replicable in the educational world: opportunities in solidarity with others, because we cannot do much alone. Education is, undoubtedly, a space to dream and, in these times, to dream it in the peripheries. Ardent zeal is the leaven that transforms and makes meaningful what has been losing its flavor and meaning.

Dear Lasallians, at the conclusion of this 3rd AIMEL, let us renew our faith in what is profoundly human and in the incomparable value of *fraternity*; let us risk being leaven, let us propose to be music that accompanies the journey of our peoples; let us make education an engine of transformation and a source of hope.

Lord, into your hands we place what we have lived; we direct our gaze to the peripheries; in community, we risk our lives; and with faith and ardent zeal, we set out on our journey. Live Jesus in our hearts!

¹ These remarks were delivered as an “opening message” by the Superior General and a “closing message” by the Vicar General at the 3rd International Assembly of the Lasallian Education Mission (AIMEL), which held its face-to-face session in Rome from 31 October to 4 November 2022 at the Generalate of the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

² Brother Armin Luistro was elected the 28th Superior General of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools at the 46th General Chapter in 2022. He earned his doctorate in educational management at the University of Saint La Salle (Bacolod, Philippines) and is a past president of De La Salle University in Manila.

³ Brother Carlos Gómez-Restrepo was elected Vicar General of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools at the 46th General Chapter in 2002. He earned his doctorate in educational leadership at Saint Mary’s University of Minnesota (USA), is a past president of Universidad de La Salle (Bogota, Colombia), and is a past president of Ethiopian Catholic University – La Salle (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia).

⁴ In the *Aula Magna* (Great Hall) in which the Assembly conducted its business are found the portraits of all of the past Brothers Superior General of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

⁵ The sanctuary in the main chapel at the Generalate of the Brothers of the Christian Schools contains the glass reliquary with the earthly remains of Saint John Baptist de La Salle.

⁶ International Association of La Salle Universities.

⁷ The Guadalupana Sisters of De La Salle (HGS), who were founded in Mexico around 1944 under the inspiration of Brother Juan Fromental-Cayroche, are an international Religious community of Lasallian Sisters.

⁸ The Marist Brothers (FMS), who were founded in 1817 by Saint Marcellin Champagnat, are an international Religious community of teaching Brothers

⁹ The *Global Compact on Education* is an initiative of Pope Francis that calls all of the Church's teaching Orders and educators to renew their commitment to a more open and inclusive education of young people.

¹⁰ *Encyclical Letter Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* by Pope Francis (Vatican City, 2015).

¹¹ For context, see *Pastoral Letter to the Brothers: Lasallian Stories on the Road* by Brother Armin Luistro (25 December 2022), pages 11-12: "We listened to the hopes and dreams of Lasallians, a take-off from the ongoing synodal process. We dubbed these exchanges as *Lasallian Conversations*, learned much as we repeated the process, discovered profound insights in what seemed as casual talk, and were greatly enriched by those earlier encounters with fellow Lasallians. We intend to use this approach as a preferred tool to keep our ears close to the ground in the next seven years."

¹² In his meditation for the Feast of Saint Barnabas (#134.1), De La Salle reflects on the spirit of faith when he says: "in detachment, there is deep faith because one abandons oneself to the providence of God, like one who sets out to sea without sails or oars."

¹³ Alisa Macksey, Brother Nestor Anaya, Fritzie Ian DeVera, Brother Francisco Paco Chiva, Heather Ruple Gilson, Brother Antxon Andueza, Colette Allix, Brother Andrés Goveia, and many others....