

I. Some Opening Thoughts and Questions I Ask Myself

It seems both a very short and a very long 20 months ago since we first gathered in this place for our Constitutive Assembly, not yet a new District, but no longer really three separate Districts, to set the course for our journeying forward as DENA.

Those days were a time of grace and Providence, and these past 20 months, a time of blessing with many signs and experiences of new life, and some challenges, as well, in which we are also invited to find the blessing. Throughout all of these days we were mindful of the integral and significant role of our Partners in the creation and the vitality of DENA.

We might recall the recurring refrain from Fred Mueller's homily from our opening liturgy of that Assembly, in this Chapel, "**we are not alone on this journey**". We continue to journey together with our Partners who have wagered much themselves on this new venture, and without whom, the Lasallian Mission of DENA would not be possible.

We begin this evening the first of three connected movements for the deepening and strengthening of the District: this opening of the Chapter, then on to the Called to Be Brothers Retreat this summer, the Mission Assembly in early November, and then the closure of the Chapter next spring. We do all of this under the overarching banner of "**Together and by Association for Mission – a journey of hope**", the theme chosen by representatives from each of the respective planning committees.

The banners before us visualize this dynamic unity and will be present at each gathering to speak to us of each one's respective leg of the new journey, and to recall for us that "**we are not alone on this journey**".

Each of our three movements has a scriptural theme or icon: The Chapter, **The Road to Jerusalem**; Our Called to Be Brothers Retreat, **The Road to Emmaus**; and our Mission Assembly, **the many Roads** we are/and will be called and sent forth to journey **through the inspiration and experience of Pentecost**. Viewed in their unity, these three movements remind us that we, Brothers and Partners, are one Lasallian Community on a journey together in hope!

Prominent in each of these three banners is **the Star of Faith** which recalls Saint La Salle's meditation for the feast of the Epiphany (Med 96) and **the Magi**, who guided by the star, came to "recognize Jesus in the poor rags" of the manger.

The Magi, in Saint La Salle's words, "were led by the star, which moved ahead of them until it reached the place where the Child was and stopped there." For us Brothers, and for all disciples, the **Journey and the Star** are our true north and the GPS that always leads to Jesus, and to a share in His mission of announcing and acting to bring about the reign of God! These companion images, the **Journey and the Star**, speak to us of a Community that must always be discerning the new inspirations of the Spirit, and, of a Community that is always on the move.

As we begin this Chapter, we form a very special Community. It calls us to move from our local reality of ministry and community to the larger reality and needs of the District, the Region, and the Institute. Within this movement we recall that we belong to something that is greater than ourselves, and that we hold in trust for our Brothers and Partners, the future of the District.

Brother Tim Coldwell, Visitor of New Orleans - Santa Fe, in a recent letter to his Brothers and Partners, spotlighted for them that “one of the hidden powers of our charism is communal discernment.” While “Saint La Salle embraced the vocation of Founder, he was ever attentive to calling forth the founding energies in the Brothers by listening to them, and empowering them to make major decisions. The lesson for us is that the generative power he unleashed in the Brothers is, if we are attentive, still living and breathing, as we listen to one another.”

In considering Palm Sunday and the Road to Jerusalem as our theme, we are given a dramatic and clear roadmap for the journey forward which gets quickly to the heart of the Gospel message: while there may be moments of exuberant Hosanna’s and palm waving along the way, the Jerusalem Road ultimately leads to Calvary!

The call of this journey road is radical: to leave everything and to follow Christ (Lk 5:28); or, in the words of the Rule (art 22) to **“freely, and without any thought of turning back, base our whole existence on the gospel in order to follow Jesus”**. It looks pretty good from this side of Jerusalem, but the stakes get much higher as we get closer to town!

The bottom line here is that if we go down this road, hard decisions and dying, which is to say letting go, are always the prerequisites for new life.... for the in-breaking of grace and the future....and for creating the space for young and future Brothers to do what we cannot imagine or anticipate now. As Sister Joan Chittister, OSB, writes in a reflection on the “Spirituality of Diminishment” it calls for us “to hand ourselves over to the immensity of God and to trust in his Providence.” Something that Saint La Salle and the Brothers have always understood and done.

The challenge of this journey is framed best in the question posed by Brother Alvaro to the delegates of the 44th General Chapter and by extension to all of us, **“Where are we willing to journey, personally and communally, and in association with our Partners, in renewing and realizing our mission of education and evangelization to young people, especially the poor”?**

Practically, it asks the question, what are we willing to embrace and what are we willing to let go of? Put differently, are we creating the new District we aspired to, or are we just rearranging the furniture in a larger version of the legacy Districts, and letting the chips fall where they may?

It seems to me we have two fundamental stances for the future: we can hunker down and maintain our presence in every ministry and community that we have and try to preserve this for as long as we can; or, we can tap into the generative powers of our founding charism and remain open and responsive to the

inspirations of the Holy Spirit made known to us in the continual needs presented to us by the Institute, the Church, and the poor.

II. A Bit of a Score-sheet on Blessings and Challenges

As we move into the work of this first District Chapter there are blessings and challenges that I offer by way of context:

Blessings:

1. From the perspective of District governance:
 - a. Good structure in place for the pastoral and temporal care of the Brothers
 - b. Good place financially
 - c. Trusts and Corporations well organized & managed
 - d. Strong and representative District Council
 - e. Up and running Committees of the District
2. From the Mission Perspective:
 - a. Well organized and led Office for Mission and Ministry
 - b. Committed and competent Mission Exec Council along with Lasallian Associations for Higher Ed, Secondary Schools, Elem/Middle Schools, Youth & Family Services
 - c. Close accompaniment of Ministries: Mission Office, Visitors
 - d. Rich and diverse District formation programs
 - e. Strong and evolving Web Presence
3. The Blessing of Association:
 - a. A rich blessing, Circular 461, ***Associated for the Lasallian Mission.... an Act of Hope*** the heart of which is captured for me on p 57 – “Calling oneself Lasallian is an invitation to respond to God as a person “called and sent”. It means **living a dynamic process that finds all of us on a journey into the unknown**. It is an adventure much like the one that inspired St. John Baptist De La Salle over 325 years ago.”
 - i. A path setting and life giving document that has great resonance with our Partners
 - ii. Speaks of a commitment at the personal, spiritual and communal level
 - b. The charismatic Witness of RILAG, LAMAS, PALM
 - c. 4 Brothers & 3 Partners at CIL on Association
 - d. Strong Participation in LLI, Buttimer, IALU (International Association of Lasallian Universities) which create & enhance bonds of association
 - e. Personal collaboration and willingness to share our gifts with Partners
 - f. Community Hospitality & Accompaniment of Partners, especially Partners in Mission Leadership

- g. **The grace and call of this moment for us is to support our Partners in their vocational journey re mission, charism, spirituality, and mission leadership**
4. The blessing of Brothers Active in Ministry 208/362 (58%)
 - a. 183 Brothers (51%) Fulltime (including men in their 70's, 80's)
 - b. 25 Brothers (7%) Part-time
 - c. 21 Brother Chief Administrators
 - i. Importance of using our positional and moral leadership to promote Lasallian community and model Lasallian mission leadership

 5. A Fragile Blessing – Initial Formation and Vocation Promotion
 - a. 6 Brothers in Initial Formation: 1 Temp Vows; 4 Novices; 1 Postulant
 - b. 20 Young Men in the Contact Program
 - c. **Critical importance of renewing current works and creating new ones for the educational service of the poor (lines of action: International Mission Assembly and 44th General Chapter)**
 - d. Actively inspiring/inviting young men to our life
 - e. Personal belief: If young men feel called to do challenging work which asks for sacrifices, risks, and some sense of adventure then we will have no problem in finding young people who are interested to join. If, on the other hand, all we have to offer is our success and all the amenities of a middle class life then we will see few vocations and have to settle for the weak, the wounded, and the lazy.

 6. The blessing of our “Evangelical Relevance”
 - a. Witness and offer community for mission
 - b. Witness a fraternal and servant leader model of leadership
 - c. Recognize the ministerial gifts and leadership of our Partners
 - d. Embody a spirituality of “mystical realism” – the integration of interior life & ministry
 - e. Have at our disposal our freedom to be “called and sent”, financial resources, creativity, international network
 - f. **And, in Brother Alvaro’s words to the Intercapitular “In a world that has exiled God.... our call, as disciples of Jesus, is to bear witness to the loving presence of God, and to extend it by our lives.”**

Challenges:

7. Fragility of Ministries – primarily in service to young people from working class and economically struggling families
 - a. Last year:

- i. Cardinal Gibbons, Baltimore (closed)
 - ii. Young Adult Spiritual Center, Philadelphia (closed)
 - b. This year:
 - i. Bishop Walsh, Cumberland (withdrawal)
 - ii. *A second school we may be withdrawing from*
 - iii. La Salle School at St. Gabriel's, East Elmhurst (closing)
 - iv. San Miguel, Camden (closing)
 - c. Next Year???
 - d. **How do we stay connected to the working class and the poor? How do we renew our current ministries to provide more access to the working class and poor? How do we create sustainable new works for the working class and the poor?**
8. From an FSC Actuarial Perspective (AKA: The Perspective of Cosmic Humility):
- a. On Wednesday, September 9, 2009 (Constitutive Assembly) there were 382 of us
 - b. As of this morning there are 362 Brothers (Avg age 70)
 - i. In these 19 months we are 20 fewer; in 4 years we will be 60 fewer
 - 1. a time of rapid diminishment
 - c. Our largest cohort of men is 262 Brothers between 60 and 84.... in 5 year cohorts:
 - i. 59 between 60 – 64
 - ii. 57 between 70 – 74
 - iii. 51 between 80 – 84
 - iv. Good news: 66 Bros under 60. Challenge: clock is ticking.... The urgency of promoting the Lasallian Vocation
9. From the Perspective of the Institute: A Challenge and a Blessing:
- a. The Principle of Solidarity and the call to make our resources (human and financial) available for mission in the neediest sectors of the Institute

III. **Some Closing Thoughts on Hope and the Future**

There are small but overpowering voices out there today, perhaps even among us, like the deafening horns of last summer's World Cup of Soccer in South Africa, the Vuvuzelas. They would have us believe that religious life is over: that we are too old, we are not attracting vocations, we are not relevant today, and that religious life has run its course in the life of the Church. These voices, from within and outside, can become the dominant narrative, and even a convenient truth for those of us who have lost our faith and zeal, and a rationale for living lives that are resigned, secure, and safe.

Brothers, as long as there are poor young people who are in need of an education and who are far from salvation... the need for us will be great! The Lord will call but we must inspire and invite.

We have before us many more signs of hope and new life than of dying. And our best days can yet be ahead of us. The hope that we journey with, among ourselves and with our Partners, has the power to make us go beyond our doubts and fears, to do creative and perhaps unimaginable things. It is a hope that implies action: discerning, deciding, and going forward in new ways for the future.

At this past LASSCA Workshop in March, I was struck by the words of one of the Keynote presenters, Ray McNulty, President of the International Center for Leadership in Education, who stated something that we all know but he said so well: **“The future is not someplace we are going to, but a place we are creating. The paths to the future are not found but made.”** This is the future that our journey of hope, together and by association for mission, risks and commits to.

Once again, in her reflection on the spirituality of diminishment for Religious Life today, Joan Chittister, OSB, asserts that diminishment can be a powerful source for hope. In her words, “This is a great moment for those whose souls are still alive with God. Diminishment requires more life of us than we have ever known before. It leads us to ourselves, to give everything we’ve got, to know the power of God at work in us far beyond our own strength, far beyond our own vision.... Diminishment throws us back, whole and entire, small and trusting, aflame and afire, on God.... It requires that we work without stint, trust without reason, pray without ceasing, and hope without end.”

So, Brothers, as we make our way toward Jerusalem, like so many Magi on a journey, let us keep our Partners in mind, keep our hope alive, and keep our eyes on that Star!

Live Jesus in our hearts!

District Chapter Part 1
April 15-17, 2011