

# A Lasallian encounter with Pope Leo XIV

*Article written by Brother Robert Schieler, who served as Superior General of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools from 2014-2022.*

The new Pope Leo XIV is not unfamiliar with our Institute or with the Brothers.

In 2014, the Brothers of the Christian Schools held their 45<sup>th</sup> General Chapter at their Generalate (or Mother House) in Rome. The purpose of a General Chapter was to undertake a periodic evaluation of the Institute, continue its adaptation and renewal, establish guidelines and direction for that adaptation and renewal, and to elect the Brother Superior and General Councilors.[1]

In the early stages of a Chapter there is a retreat with an invited facilitator. A retreat permits the elected Chapter delegates to suspend their normal routines, to step back, take a deep breath, and enter a period of spiritual discernment to prepare themselves for the momentous decisions that they will take at the Chapter's conclusion. By placing themselves in the presence of God, they hope that they may collectively hear the voice of the Holy Spirit and better understand and meet the needs of the time.

The person chosen to facilitate the three-day retreat in 2014 was a good friend of Brother Álvaro Rodríguez, the Brothers' Superior General at the time. This friend was Father Robert Prevost, the future Pope Leo XIV and former Prior General of the Augustinians. Their friendship developed while both led their respective religious families. At the time, Brother Álvaro was serving two terms as president of the Union of Superiors General (USG), the first non-ordained religious to do so. Prior to his election a candidate for the office had to be a priest. Recalling his time with Father Prevost, Brother Álvaro said, "I remember him as a friendly religious, always close, with a deep spirituality and great availability".

Brother Álvaro further recalled, "I remember in a special way our involvement in the Synod on the New Evangelization in 2012". During that synod, the elected Superiors General were permitted to make an intervention. Brother Álvaro's presentation was on young people and the new evangelization and the theme

developed by the then Prior, Robert Prevost, was on the characteristics of the new evangelization.

Below is a description of the 2014 retreat that Father Prevost gave to the Brothers, based on my notes and recollections. Perhaps they provide some insights into Pope Leo XIV's spirituality, priorities, and vision for the Church and his papacy.

In his introductory remarks to the delegates of the 2014 General Chapter, Father Prevost suggested that the task for Chapter delegates was to explore a larger vision, a reason for being at this General Chapter. To help those of us at the Chapter explore this larger vision, he offered six conferences over the course of the three days. This "exploration of the larger vision" prompted one delegate to ask, "Will the outcomes be ones of continuity or change?" Looking around the Aula Magna,[2] he wondered if this group of men, many in their 50s, 60s, 70s, and some even in their 80s, was capable of risking change? The Brother asked, "Can we imagine the Institute in new and different ways?"

The theme of the opening conference was: "Lord, teach us to pray". Father Prevost began with these words of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark (6:31), "Come aside with me to pray". Jesus, he said, tells us not to pile up words when we pray. Rather, we must empty our minds of words and open our hearts to God's Word. He also reminded us of the aridity of prayer that is so frequent in the lives of those who seek to be in God's presence. When that happens, how should we react? He suggested Mother Teresa of Kolkata as a good example. In her private memoir, she spoke of the dryness of her prayer life over a period of 30 years. Yet she persevered in placing herself daily in God's holy presence. Perhaps, like other religious, Father Prevost was reflecting on his own periods of aridity, trusting in God abiding presence in time of perceived absence.

He concluded his introductory remarks by offering several passages from Scripture for our personal prayer and reflection, especially in times of aridity:

- "For what do I wait, Lord? In you is my hope" (Psalm 39:8-9)
- "Hear my prayer, O Lord; to my cry give ear; to my weeping be not deaf. For I am a wayfarer before you, a pilgrim like all my fathers" (Psalm 39:13)
- "Only in God is my soul at rest; from him comes my salvation" (Psalm

62:2)

- “The favors of the Lord are not exhausted, his mercies are not spent; they are renewed each morning, so great is his faithfulness” (Lamentations 3:22-23)

The second day's conference theme was: “Where are you God?”. Father Prevost's comments focused on our life of faith and those times when we doubt that faith. He shared a comment by one of his confreres: “We are an Easter people, but we are living in a Good Friday world”. He suggested that perhaps more of us are living in a Holy Saturday world, which is an in-between time, a time of transition. Later in our small group, one delegate suggested that we as Brothers at the Chapter and Brothers in general are in all three places of the Paschal Mystery; some of us are living Good Friday, some are living Holy Saturday, and some Easter Sunday.

In that year of 2014, the Brothers were celebrating a significant moment in the life of the early Institute. Three hundred years earlier, in 1714, De La Salle experienced his own “dark night of the soul”, removing himself from the mission in Paris and ultimately arriving at the mountaintop hermitage in Parmenie above the city of Grenoble. At that time, De La Salle believed that he was a source of the trouble that the Brothers were experiencing with Church and civil authorities. He also felt that he had lost the trust of some of the Brothers. Therefore, he felt it best if he removed himself from those tensions, visiting the Brothers in the south of France before going on to Parmenie and seclusion. Eventually, the Brothers in Paris, in a powerfully written letter, ordered De La Salle under his vow of obedience (and with the urging of “Sister Louise”),[3] to return to Paris and again take up the leadership of the Institute.

Referencing that event, Father Prevost asked, “What is it that we would want to write today, especially if we wanted to rewrite the letter of the Brothers to De La Salle?”. What is the story we want to leave behind for others? How have we lived our relationship with God in the innermost part of our being? One Chapter delegate mused: “A worthwhile thought to consider. But a letter to whom? Who are we calling back? And to what are we being called to?”.

The theme of his third conference was “God is in the story, our story”. He began by speaking of memory, the place where we begin to find God in our life. Recall the eucharistic liturgy where the priest intones, “Do this in memory of me”.

Referring again to the letter of the Brothers to De La Salle, Father Prevost suggested that we should write our own story of how God works in our life, the story that we would want to leave behind for others. Like novels, he went on to say, journals/memoirs have a theme. What is our personal theme that describes our life as religious Brothers today?

During the conference, Father Prevost quoted from his own Augustinian charism: "Let me know myself so that I might know you O God" (St. Augustine). Here, he said, a memoir is not essentially about me, about us, but about God's relationship with us; God dwelling within the innermost part of our being. In this vein, Father Prevost suggested that Chapter delegates make a conscientious reflection and evaluation of the past, believing that such a reflection can help in building a desired future for the Lasallian mission.

The spirituality of communion was the next conference theme. Father Prevost began with Sunday's first reading from the Acts of the Apostles 2:42-47 - "All who believed were together and had all things in common". This is the mystery of communion, he said, counteracting today's *zeitgeist*, which is centered around an exaggerated sense of self at the expense of the common good. The great challenge for us today is to make the spirituality of communion the guiding principle of education. He invited us to offer to the world today the best elements of our charism: fraternity and community life. He quoted Vatican II document, *Lumen Gentium* about our obligation to relieve the world's suffering and misery and Saint John Paul II's apostolic exhortation, *Vita Consecrata* calling us to be experts on the spirituality of communion:

There is only one Spirit who, according to his own richness and the needs of the ministries, distributes his different gifts for the welfare of the Church. Among these gifts stand out the grace given to the apostles. To their authority, the Spirit himself subject even those who were endowed with charisms. Giving the body unity through himself and through his power and through the internal cohesion of its members, this same Spirit produces and urges love among the believers. Consequently, if one member suffers anything, all the members suffer too, and if one member is honored, all the members rejoice together (LG, No. 7).

Consecrated persons are asked to be true experts of communion and to practice the spirituality of communion as witnesses and architects of the plan for unity which is the crowning point of human history in God's design (VC, No. 46).

On the final day of the retreat, Father Prevost opened his presentation with an excerpt from the film *Of Gods and Men*, which recounts the murder of the French Trappists in Algeria. The film introduced his theme for that day: Service in the style of the Gospel. His remarks were about servant leadership. He also reiterated an earlier comment that our gift to the Church, our charism, is our witness to fraternity.

The theme of the final conference was: “The courage to dream, the challenge of the mission”. Father Prevost related how delegates to his congregation’s General Chapter, held the previous September, had included very different participants – “veterans and newbies” – dreamers and realists. Out of such diversity and differing views, whether theological, political, or otherwise their task had been to explore the larger vision, the reason for being in Chapter. The same is true for us today. To realize the larger vision, we must find unity in our diversity through our openness to prayerfully listen to God’s spirit.

Father Prevost then proposed that the delegates consider the key elements for an apostolic institute like ours, one with a definite mission. Those key elements were taken from Pope Francis’ *The Joy of the Gospel*: 1) understanding and living out a spirituality that responds to people’s thirst for God; 2) discovering and living a spirituality that offers healing; 3) manifesting an apostolic zeal that goes out to the margins; 4) and making a recommitment to education in ways that integrate fraternity, service and community. Finally, he spoke to one great challenge in our role as educators, finding language that young people can understand. He believed our Institute was well-placed to help make that happen. In *The Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis expressed a desire that the young should exercise greater leadership. Our Institute’s Young Lasallian movement is one of the structures that enable young people to exercise leadership and for their educators, it may be one path to encounter the language of the young.

Father Prevost concluded the retreat with the well-quoted lines from T.S. Eliot’s “Little Gidding”, *Four Quartets*, “We shall not cease from exploration. And the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.” And on a more humorous note, he brought his time with us to and end with this quip from the Former Superior of the Dominicans, Father (later Cardinal) Timothy Radcliffe: “The meaning of applause: in the beginning, an act of faith, halfway through, an act of hope, and at the conclusion, an act of charity”.

Could these conference themes tell us something about the spiritual life of Pope Leo XIV? About his dreams and hope for his papacy and for our world? Personally, I believe they do. The pope calls the faithful to a life of prayer, the search for God, discovering God's vocation for us in our stories and memories, the conviction that we are all sisters and brothers nourishing our spiritual lives through dialogue and in community, and having the courage to dream a better world despite the fragmentation and polarization infecting our polity and our souls. This could very well be Pope Leo's hope for humanity. It is his formula for realizing a hope that relies on all who take up the call to be missionary disciples for the sake of the Gospel. Furthermore, we can consider his choice of name for an insight into his priorities. In 1891 Pope Leo XIII published his encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, advocating for the Catholic Church's social teachings, social and economic justice for all, especially workers. It seems Pope Leo XIV will continue the legacy of Pope Francis.

Perhaps, in his hope for humanity, Pope Leo XIV too takes to heart the dream of the prophet Habakkuk, "The vision still has its time, presses on to fulfillment, and will not disappoint; if it delays, wait for it, it will surely come, it will not be late" (Habakkuk 2:2-3). This is the vision of the Reign of God promised by Jesus.

It is this hope and this vision that the Brothers sought when they gathered in Chapter in Spring 2014, adopting the theme: "This work of God is also our work".

On that afternoon of May 8, 2025, I believe that the Holy Spirit manifested God's will to the Cardinals gathered in the Sistine Chapel, God's will for the Church and our world today. Let us pray for the former Bob Prevost, Pope Leo XIV, and do our part in bringing this hope and vision, this invitation to truly live out our charism and vocation, into reality, whether through prayer, through support, through small leavening actions of hope, or through whatever means are at our disposal. It is our way of realizing Pope Leo's first public words to the world: "Peace be with you all!".

*\* Article published on the RELAN website.*

**[1] Cf. 2015 Rule, 112.**

**[2] Aula Magna = Great Hall, the General Chapter meeting space in their Mother House.**

**[3] “Sister Louise” was not a religious sister but a holy woman who provided retreats and spiritual direction to those who came to the hermitage.**