RELAL – 1st Lasallian Volunteer Congress

Thirty-eight participants from eight countries, which guaranteed the presence of all the Lasallian Districts that make up the Lasallian Latin American Region, gathered in Cochabamba, Bolivia, from July 6 to 9 of this year, for the 1st Lasallian Volunteer Congress. This diverse group, with significant female participation, which also brought together Brothers, lay people, members of Foundations, Young Lasallians and Lasallian volunteers, made it possible this formative and fraternal meeting which was came up as a result of the work of the RELAL network of volunteers, and with which it was hoped to begin to trace out a way to respond to the need to strengthen the management teams of volunteers.

The various reflections and discussions held by the network over the last few years have matured into a three-pronged strategy: getting closer, getting together and mapping out. During the years of the pandemic, advantage was taken of the boom in virtuality to begin a rapprochement with each of the Districts in order to understand the way in which the different volunteer works and their respective management teams operate, thus making it possible to identify themes and needs which could be dealt with at the first Lasallian Volunteer Congress, which would consolidate the moment of "getting together".

The opening of the event was in the hands of God, where the participants and hosts got prepared for a Eucharistic celebration marked by Latin American rhythms and symbols. From this first moment, small earthenware pots were placed on the altar, which would gradually mark the main symbol which would guide the development of the event and which evoked the figure of a Potter God: everything placed in his hands, so that, through the different exhibitions, dialogues, experiences visited and workshops held, the conceptual precision could be found which would allow challenges and possibilities to be expressed for Lasallian volunteer works in the Region.

Brother Martin Digilio, General Councillor, reminded those present of paragraph 77 of Fratelli Tutti: " We have the space we need for co-responsibility in creating and putting into place new processes and changes. Let us take an active part in

renewing and supporting our troubled societies". Assuming the idea of being an active part, the participants were introduced day by day to the different themes of the Congress, such as: volunteering from the Lasallian charism, being a Lasallian volunteer, economic sustainability, fundraising and vocational volunteering. The testimonies and the exchange of experiences were also vital to awaken a special sensitivity in the whole participating group, which in turn allowed us to remember that noble idea that we can also learn from others, thus allowing the sharing of a couple of experiences outside the Lasallian world: Mario Aroyo Olguin, a Marist missionary, and Anne-Sofie Fog, coordinator of MS Denmark for volunteering in Latin America, shared part of the privacy of their organisations and their operation to nourish the themes of the Congress.

Organisers and participants, merged into a single group and supported by a warm host team, implemented the proposed agenda smoothly day by day. Integration was easy, as if they were all brothers and sisters, and there was a fluent dialogue between corridors, sharing at the table and celebrating in the evenings the joy of a Latin American celebration that had been overshadowed for a long time by the pandemic.

Deep reflections echoed throughout the event and were in the minds of those present, who were expressing ever stronger motivations to return to their Districts with the firm idea of strengthening the voluntary work and the articulation between the members of the network and the Institute itself. The Congress thus allowed a kind of wheel of alliances to be formed, which allows us to see the linking of the third moment, that of projecting ourselves, and which affirms the continuity of the work in the network. The strength and potential of voluntary work in the Region was confirmed by a series of agreements that are in the hands of the Regional Secretary. With the notable presence of the person in charge of International Volunteer matters of the De La Salle Solidarietà Internazionale ONLUS Foundation, the Congress ended by strengthening the links between the members of the network and its liaison in Rome, for the future work on the issues of volunteering and the challenges identified from here.

The whole group also decided to compile the outcomes of the congress in a synthesis exercise, which would allow each of the participants to easily share and socialise within each of the Districts those learnings and challenges identified. In this synthesis, the symbol of the clay pot emerged once again as a living metaphor that, through the artisan's creative process, connects us with what we

experienced during this Congress. Now the members of the event find in Lasallian voluntary work a clear expression of the charism and the possibility of a sacred clay which can be moulded. The synthesis can be consulted on the event's microsite: https://congresodevoluntariado.org/

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