



Brothers of
the Christian
Schools



Saint Joseph, the forerunner of fraternity

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Introduction

The Brothers find a model for their whole life in Saint Joseph, who shared in the work of salvation by the human education of Jesus Christ. They invoke him, remembering that the Founder placed the Institute under his protection. (R. 75)

One year after the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, as a Lasallian Family we continue to be concerned about providing a quality educational service to more than one million children, adolescents, young people and adults enrolled in our educational ministries, sometimes in the midst of multiple difficulties, in an increasingly uncertain world. While in some countries it has been possible to reopen schools, in others this situation still seems a long way off. As an international community committed to education, we join the proposal of international agencies such as UNESCO and UNICEF, among others, to reopen schools as safe environments¹. The rising rates of violence against boys and girls, adolescents and women worldwide cannot go unnoticed by our eyes either. In fact, the latest BICE Conference, held in digital format, focused on denouncing the violence that has intensified since the Covid-19 pandemic:

Efforts to contain the coronavirus, while vital to the health of the population, expose children (boys and girls) and adolescents to increased risk of physical, sexual and psychological violence, especially within the family. The health and social crisis, which has pushed many vulnerable families into poverty or extreme poverty, among other things, is also causing high levels of stress, even in children.²

In this context Pope Francis has invited us, through the Apostolic Letter *Patris Corde*, to reflect on the figure of Saint Joseph, on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of his being declared universal Patron Saint of the Catholic Church. For us, as Lasallians, Saint Joseph has been present in our Institute from the very beginning and has been a point of reference for the vocation of the Brothers of the Christian Schools since the first Common Rules. In fact, our Holy Founder declared him Patron and Protector of our Institute³ and encouraged the first Brothers, through his spiritual writings, to ask for his intercession as the exalted collaborator in God the Father's plan of salvation, educating Jesus Christ, attentive to the inspirations of the Spirit, in his journey with the Blessed Virgin.

¹ cf. Framework for reopening Schools. Joint statement by UNESCO, UNICEF, WB and WFP. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373348/PDF/373348eng.pdf.multi>

² BICE. Conference to end violence against children and adolescents in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Held on 19 and 20 November 2020. Available in Spanish at: <https://bice.org/es/america-latina-conferencia-para-poner-fin-a-la-violencia-contra-los-niños-niñas-y-adolescentes-en-el-contexto-de-la-pandemia-del-covid-19/>

³ *Common Rules* (1705), §10.8.

This publication, addressed to the entire Lasallian Family, aims to contribute to the updating of the figure of Saint Joseph as a spiritual reference point for our educational mission, rooted in a pedagogical-spiritual heritage of more than three hundred years. As the *Declaration on the Lasallian Educational Mission* (2020) reminds us, we follow in the footsteps of the founding intuitions which have laid the foundations of an educational heritage which continues to be incarnated, and which demands continuous discernment on our part⁴.

⁴ Brothers of the Christian Schools (2020). *Declaration on the Lasallian Educational Mission*. Challenges, convictions and hopes, p. 18.

1. Joseph, the believer

Hard times may come, when the cross casts its shadow, yet nothing can destroy the supernatural joy that "adapts and changes, but always endures, even as a flicker of light born of our personal certainty that, when everything is said and done, we are infinitely loved". That joy brings deep security, serene hope and a spiritual fulfilment that the world cannot understand or appreciate. (Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exultate*, 125).

1.1 Joseph, the man who opens the doors to the New Testament

We start from the experience of "Joseph, the husband of Mary. Of her was born Jesus who is called the Messiah" (Mt 1:16). In this way the evangelist Matthew presents Joseph, who is indispensable to establish the link between the Scriptures (Old Testament) and the experience of Jesus (New Testament). Joseph is an inaugural character, forerunner and proactive of the Good News⁵. As a descendant of the house of David he has a mission in the history of salvation; he acts in silence, living to the full his experience as a man of faith, a husband and a father.

The gospel sequence reminds us that Mary had previously, without saying a word to Joseph, made the personal decision to conceive the "Son of the Most High" (Lk 1:32). Mary had left everything in God's hands; and, trusting also in Joseph, she was convinced that the just man would know how to allow himself to be challenged in faith "...because, as a man of God, he would understand what was happening by consulting the same God who lives in him"⁶.

For his part, Joseph, complying with the socio-political context of the Roman Empire and being "of the house and family of David" (Lk 2:4), had to be enrolled in the city of Bethlehem, which was his place of origin and belonging. He takes with him "Mary, his betrothed, who was with child" (Lk 2:5). Matthew emphasises Joseph's role: he is the one betrothed to Mary; but he is also the righteous man who discovers that the woman he loves is pregnant (Mt 1,18). This situation puzzles him because it questions the life project dreamed of by both of them; however, God himself will have to intercede, through an envoy, an angel, to help him understand the magnitude of the project he will have in his hands. It is thanks to this dialogue, lived in the intimacy of his heart as a man of faith, that Joseph accepts to associate himself with Mary's vocation - to be the mother of Jesus through the work of the Holy Spirit - by taking her into his home (Mt 1:24).

Joseph finally, free from uncertainty, takes up his vocation as a husband. And not only that, but he also names the child (Mt 1:21); that is to say, he recognises him as his own, giving him an identity, from David's lineage, thus opening the doors to the New Testament. Joseph "did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him" (Mt 1:24): he accepted to be a husband and father, a vocation received from God himself, together with Mary, to make it possible that Jesus, the Son of the Most High, breaks in the history of humanity.

⁵ We are inspired in Philippe Lefebvre's work (2012), *Joseph, l'éloquence d'un taciturne*. Paris: Éditions Salvator.

⁶ Lefebvre, 2012, p. 54.

1.2 The Heroic Vow, an experience also lived in silence

On November 21st, 2021 we will celebrate the 330th anniversary of the Heroic Vow. As we all remember, it was "...a secret vow pronounced in the absence of any ecclesiastical superior, a private vow from the canonical point of view, which would not be revealed to anyone during the life of John Baptist and which would be known only from 1733 onwards".⁷ It was thanks to Brother Gabriel Drolin, one of its protagonists, who made it known to Brother Timothée, 2nd Superior General, on his return from Rome in 1728, and whose document he gave to the biographer Jean-Baptiste Blain to pass on to the Brothers in the official biography of the Founder.

In 1691, the emerging community of the Brothers of the Christian Schools found itself, in Blain's words, "...at a time when there was no appearance of the Institute being able to survive".⁸ In fact, John Baptist de La Salle, already in 1690, had been carrying on the work of the schools for a little more than ten years, in the midst of great external and internal difficulties: the first came, above all, from the interference of the parish priests and local ecclesiastical superiors, who wished to modify the plan of life and action of the Brothers in order to satisfy their pastoral needs; the latter came from the Brothers themselves, whose inexperience generated mistrust and drove away vocations coming to the Institute. After the death of Brother Henri L'Heureux and the concern for De La Salle's health, the reality of the work by 1691 was very fragile.

This extreme situation of uncertainty about the future prompted De La Salle to commit himself secretly, through a vow of association, with two of his most trusted Brothers - Brothers Gabriel Drolin and Nicolas Vuyart - "...to seek and maintain this establishment [that of the Society of the Christian Schools] without leaving it, even if only the three of us were left in the said Society, and if we were obliged to beg for alms and live on bread alone...".⁹

This founding event, but lived in the secrecy of an association founded on faith among John Baptist, Gabriel and Nicolas, generated a dynamic that spoke to the hearts of the Brothers. The strength of the conviction experienced by the principal Brothers of the Institute generated the necessary confidence in the midst of uncertainty. Three years later, on the feast of the Holy Trinity in 1694, twelve Brothers associated themselves publicly, "...to keep together and by association gratuitous schools wherever I may be sent, even if I should be obliged, for that purpose, to beg for alms and live on bread alone or to do in the said Society whatever I may be destined to do...".¹⁰

De La Salle and the first Brothers founded the Institute out of a deep and proven conviction of faith. Like Saint Joseph, they accepted the difficulties from the serenity of a heart confident in the will of God, who called them to associate themselves to take on with zeal a new and necessary educational service for the children of the artisans and the poor of their time, open also to all children, without exception, because "God wants all to be saved".¹¹

⁷ Hours, Bernard (2019). *John Baptist de La Salle. Un mystique en action*. Paris: Éditions Salvator, p. 215.

⁸ Blain, Jean-Baptiste. The life of Monsieur John Baptist de La Salle, Teacher of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. Tome I. *Cahiers lasalliens* 7, p. 313.

⁹ Bédel, Henri (1998). Initiation into the history of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. Origins 1651-1726. Rome: Maison Saint Jean-Baptiste de La Salle. *Lasallian Studies* 5, p. 86.

¹⁰ Idem, p. 96.

¹¹ MTR 193, 3.1.

1.3 St. Joseph, the guide on this journey of faith

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought to the forefront the major educational difficulties that already existed around the world. "The cost of closing schools – which at the peak of pandemic lockdowns affected 90 per cent of students worldwide and left more than a third of schoolchildren with no access to remote education – has been devastating."¹² But, not only for students, but also for educators; in large parts of the world many are living in a critical situation of poverty and economic and technical deprivation. Suddenly they have had to face a digital world for which they were unprepared, with no support or help from national education systems.

At this critical moment in our mission as educators, the experience of St. Joseph invites us to listen to the voice of the Lord who speaks to us in intimacy.

- How can I renew my faith gaze towards this new normal?¹³
- How do I combine an attentive reading of the Scriptures and the reality that I have in front of me and that affects me deeply as an educator?
- How can I resume my vocation as an educator, strengthening my convictions from my faith, from my fundamental purpose, in order to put myself at the service of those God has entrusted to me?
- How can I strengthen my fraternal relationship with those whom I am invited to renew my vocation of service, in order to lead "together and in association" this school experience?

¹² Statement by Henrietta Fore, UNICEF Executive Director, 12 January 2021. Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/children-cannot-afford-another-year-school-disruption>

¹³ The new normal, which Brother Superior General Robert Schieler invites us to embrace in his Pastoral Letter 2020, p. 5.

2. Joseph, the protective man

That every human being possesses an inalienable dignity is a truth that corresponds to human nature apart from all cultural change. For this reason, human beings have the same inviolable dignity in every age of history and no one can consider himself or herself authorized by particular situations to deny this conviction or to act against it. (Pope Francis, Encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, 213).

2.1 The man who decides and acts

The evangelist Matthew presents Joseph as a father of a family who has to protect his family in a violent context of insecurity and persecution. Accepting with serenity the voice of God who speaks to him through dreams, he sets out on his journey. Pope Francis in *Patris Corde* tells us that:

Joseph is certainly not passively resigned, but courageously and firmly proactive. In our own lives, acceptance and welcome can be an expression of the Holy Spirit's gift of fortitude. Only the Lord can give us the strength needed to accept life as it is, with all its contradictions, frustrations and disappointments.¹⁴

It is in the midst of such a contradictory experience that Joseph's commitment stands out. After having accepted Mary as his wife and having witnessed the birth of Jesus, he is warned by the angel in a dream to flee to Egypt with them (Mt 2:13) to avoid Herod's persecution. While already safe in Egypt he is called to return to Israel, once the danger has passed (Mt 2:20) and, finally, he is warned to withdraw to the region of Galilee to avoid possible persecution by Archelaus (Mt 2:22).

In all this dynamic, Joseph is the man who acts, convinced that the Lord has entrusted him with a mission that overwhelms him. Perhaps, together with Mary, he also "kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart" (Lk 2:19). In their nuptial engagement, we cannot fail to imagine the dialogue in faith of this couple who have based their life plan on God. Together they recognise in the Scriptures the passage of God in their lives. While meditating with them, we understand that the Infancy Gospels continually refer us back to the history of salvation which is actualised and fulfilled in Jesus.

Nazareth is the prophetic place where Joseph goes to establish his family and to undertake his work as a carpenter; it is a small unknown village "...which is not mentioned in the Scriptures, not even in the list of the villages of the tribe of Zebulun". But, it will be Jesus' place of origin when he begins his public life. Jesus will be identified in John's Gospel¹⁵ by his own people in these terms: "Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph? Do we not know his father and mother? (Jn 6:42). In Matthew, the Jews of Nazareth will ask: Is he not the carpenter's son? (Mt 13:55). And in Luke: "Isn't this the son of Joseph? (Lk 4:22).

Joseph, the carpenter, the neighbour of Nazareth, the husband of Mary, would be the father responsible for educating his son and introducing him into the Jewish society of the time. It is this experience of a father educator, in the silence of everyday life, which will inspire John Baptist de La Salle to propose him as a model educator to the Brothers.

¹⁴ Pope Francis (2020). *Apostolic Letter With a Father's Heart*. No 4.

¹⁵ Pagola, José Antonio (2013). *Jesús. Aproximación histórica*. Madrid: PPC, Editorial y Distribuidora, S.A., p.50.

2.2 We are also called upon to protect

For John Baptist de La Salle, from the silence of the Gospels, the educational mission of Joseph towards Jesus is a model for the Brother of the Christian Schools, called to educate the children of the artisans and the poor from the silence of the school routine. Our Founder emphasises, among others, two essential aspects: firstly, it is a vocation received and, secondly, that it translates into an educational action coherent with God the Father's plan of salvation.

You must have a similarly great attention and affection for pre-serving or procuring the innocence of the children entrusted to your guidance and for keeping them away from whatever might interfere with their education or prevent them from acquiring piety, just as Saint Joseph had for all that could contribute to the welfare of the Child Jesus. For you have been made responsible for these children, just as Saint Joseph was made responsible by God for the Saviour of the world. (MF 110,3,2)

Today, we share this concern as a Lasallian Family, particularly as the United Nations General Assembly has declared 2021 as the *International Year for the Elimination of Child Labour*. In a resolution that the UN has prepared to that effect, it has invited the International Labour Organisation (ILO) to take the lead in the reflection, inviting all member states to:

"to take immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced labour, end modern slavery and human trafficking and secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour, including recruitment and use of child soldiers, and by 2025 end child labour in all its forms."¹⁶

This proposal has been in preparation since 2017, when the IV Global Conference on the Sustainable Elimination of Child Labour was held in Argentina. There, the decision was made to end child labour by 2025 and forced labour by 2030 worldwide. The *Buenos Aires Declaration* denounced, already in 2017, the existence of 152 million children subjected to child labour, which prevents them from studying and preparing for the future; in addition, it was recognised, already at that time, that 25 million people are still subjected to forced labour, of which 4 million are children. And finally, there are at least 71 million unemployed young people.¹⁷

For us Lasallians, the natural place for children and adolescents is the school. Advocating the dignity of children, from our point of view, implies helping them to live their moment of growth and maturity to the full, in full respect of their rights, as expressed in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). And, therefore, perhaps we also need to think about training alternatives for those working children who are part of the economic structure of their families and who, by learning a trade, receive parental protection and live in dignified living conditions. Their rights must also be respected; they are economically active children who need a school within reach of their possibilities and ways of life. However, it has been proved that the benefits of eliminating child labour are seven times greater than the costs.¹⁸

¹⁶ United Nations. Press release of 26 July 2019. At: https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_713925/lang--en/index.htm (Accessed 29-12-2020).

¹⁷ World Labour Organisation. Press release of 16 November 2017. At: https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_597670/lang--en/index.htm (Accessed 27-12-2020).

¹⁸ cf. *Eliminating child labour: 100 years of action*. International Labour Organization; Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work Service, Geneva: ILO, 2019, ISBN: 978-92-2-133456-9.

2.3 Saint Joseph, the believer who allows himself to be challenged by reality

In the Gospel account of Jesus' infancy, we see the silent attitude of Joseph who discerns and acts in the face of danger. His diligent attitude protects his family, collaborating with the plan of God the Father. De La Salle asks us also to be protectors of children in the face of the dangers that threaten them.

Faced with the complex reality of child workers throughout the world, and inspired by St. Joseph and his vocation as an educator of Jesus Christ himself, we also challenge ourselves as an international educational family from a reality that cannot leave us indifferent:

- What place do children, adolescents and young people have in our personal and community discernment, especially those who are excluded, marginalised and poor?
- What educational responses can we develop to address the needs of out-of-school children and adolescents in our countries?
- How can we work together to eradicate child labour by promoting the creation of educational experiences appropriate to the needs of working children?
- What actions can we take to support young unemployed people who live with hopelessness and uncertainty about the future?

3. Joseph, the virtuous man

Love, then, is more than just a series of benevolent actions. Those actions have their source in a union increasingly directed towards others, considering them of value, worthy, pleasing and beautiful apart from their physical or moral appearances. Our love for others, for who they are, moves us to seek the best for their lives. Only by cultivating this way of relating to one another will we make possible a social friendship that excludes no one and a fraternity that is open to all. (Pope Francis, Encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, 94).

3.1 Joseph, father, son and brother

In Luke's Gospel, chapter 2, Joseph appears for the last time. It is an episode of Jesus' adolescence, lost and found in the Temple of Jerusalem.

After three days they found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions, and all who heard him were astounded at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him, they were astonished, and his mother said to him, "Son, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been looking for you with great anxiety." And he said to them, "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" But they did not understand what he said to them. (Lk 2:46-50).

This pilgrimage, which must not have been the first or the last in the family, is the setting in which Luke presents Joseph in his mission as father, son and brother.

Mary reprimands Jesus for his adolescent attitude: "Your father and I are in anguish". Mary combines firmness and tenderness in her words. Joseph, for his part, is reaffirmed by her in his paternal responsibility. As Pope Francis recalls in his Apostolic Letter, Joseph is a father who knows how to respect the freedom of his son; aware of his mission, he knows that, deep down, this son has been given to him by the power of the Most High¹⁹. Nevertheless, Joseph is the visible image of the Father²⁰ whom Jesus will discover, and with whom "advanced in wisdom and grace before God and man" (Lk 2:52).

Joseph and Mary do not immediately understand Jesus' response. In a special way, for Joseph it will be the call to enter into the mystery of this child, son of the Most High. With Jesus, Joseph will also be the son of the Father himself, who called him to diligent fatherhood together with Mary. Joseph is the forerunner of the child with the Son, forming him and accompanying him in his growth.

With Joseph we understand that, deep down, every fatherhood reproduces the gesture of love of a God who is close to us, who respects us deeply and who wants us to reach the fullness in our lives, which is none other than the experience of love without limits: "It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." (I Cor 13:7).

¹⁹ cf. Pope Francis. *With a Father's Heart. Apostolic Letter*.

²⁰ cf. Doze, André. *Joseph, ombre du Père*. Châteaudun: EDL, 2020, p.91.

And Joseph, being a son of the Father, is also a brother in the elder Brother. Only one who is fully aware of the mystery of life can assume with dignity the mission of guiding another and preparing them for life. Our holy Founder understood this clearly when he gave us Joseph as a model educator. Like him, we need to nourish daily an uncommon virtue and piety in order to be worthy of the educational ministry we have received, also, as a call of the Spirit in our lives.

3.2 Brothers and Sisters of our pupils

We form an international educational family which carries out its mission in secularised, multi-religious and multicultural contexts. In all these contexts, we Brothers and Lasallians are called to enter into respectful dialogue within our educational communities. "This attitude presupposes an openness and a willingness to listen, to learn, to witness to Gospel values and, as far as possible, to announce the Word of God". (R.14.1) Saint Joseph is a light on our journey.

Let us turn this time of pandemic into an opportunity to question ourselves on the evangelising quality of our educational action. We are called to build possible futures, generating a movement of educational fraternity that continues to place the needs of our students at the centre, because in them God is present and challenges us. Let us be creators of fraternity, seeking the best for others²¹.

3.3 Preghiera conclusiva

Saint Joseph, son of the Father,
husband of the Blessed Virgin,
father and educator of Jesus in Nazareth.

We recognise in you an example of an educator,
walking together with Mary,
listening to and accompanying Jesus.

We ask for your intercession as a Lasallian Family
to increase our faith
in the presence of God the Father,
that challenges us on the basis of educational needs
of today's children, young people and adults.

At this time of pandemic
May our evangelical creativity be increased
As well as our fraternity without borders,
for humanity to see in us Lasallians,
Jesus Christ himself,
way, truth and life.

²¹ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, No. 94.

In union with the Spirit,
who renews all things,
help us to work tirelessly
to build bonds of fraternity
among all the peoples of the earth.

We trust in your intercession,
In that of St. John Baptist de La Salle
and of our Saints and Blessed Brothers,
confident that God wills all people to be saved
and come to the knowledge of the truth.

Live Jesus in our hearts,
Forever!

Paris, Community of ND de la Gare, 5 March 2021
Br. Diego Muñoz León fsc



La[★]Salle