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# Let Us Remember

STORIES *of the* HOLY PRESENCE OF GOD



BROTHER GEORGE VAN GRIEKEN, FSC, EDITOR

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Christian Brothers Conference

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# Preface

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God is unfailingly present—simply, immeasurably, and always—and we dwell within the limitless borders and opportunities of that presence. A Brother recently told me, as he was reading the morning newspaper, bathed in the warming sun streaming through the window, “You know, Mexican mothers take their babies and early in the morning place them in the sunlight, calling this “The poor man’s blanket.” The simplicity of the sun’s warmth is present for all to appreciate—simply, immeasurably, and always. Its universal impact on so many levels and for so many people, poor and rich alike, is a good analogy for how we might think of God’s presence as encountered and described among us, whatever our personal details or circumstances.

Of course, God’s reach lies much beyond that of the sun. “*Vocatus atque non vocatus Deus aderit*” (“Bidden or unbidden, God is always present”) says a line from Erasmus, carved into the lintel of Carl Jung’s house in Switzerland. God’s reach goes to the heart of existence and, in the words of Abraham Joshua Heschel, the “true meaning of existence is disclosed in moments of living in the presence of God.” Such moments are illustrated by the stories in this book. Their wide spectrum, in both likely and unlikely places, attests to God’s unbound presence with us and within us. These are snapshots of God, as it were, touching our hearts, regularly and invariably impacting our lives in ways that are simply profound or profoundly simple, surprisingly unique or amazingly ordinary, via interior insights and dynamics or exterior circumstances and people, in the burning bush or in the whisper of the wind. God’s presence is never the same and yet always the same. “Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God.” (Mt 5:8)

The stories in this book are about God's manifest presence in the lives of those who share the ministry of education that has been and continues to be informed, shaped, and guided by the spirituality of Saint John Baptist de La Salle (1651–1719), who is the Patron Saint of All Teachers of Youth, the founder of the De La Salle Christian Brothers (Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools), and the charismatic touchstone for all those who live and work within Lasallian ministries. It is a book of stories where God's presence speaks through the here and now, where God is seen to dwell within people's lives. All stories give shape, substance, hope, example, and inspiration that lasts, as exemplified by the stories of Scripture. In this volume, you are invited to recognize God's handiwork in the lives of those engaged in Lasallian ministries and perhaps attend to similar previously unrecognized instances of God's presence in your own life, your own story. De La Salle calls all of his followers to be genuine "ambassadors of Jesus Christ," who is God's ultimate presence for, in, and through us. These stories are snapshots of that invitation and reality.

Brother Robert Schieler, FSC, Superior General, wrote in his 2017 Pastoral Letter, "Our stories are really important. They are the glue that holds us together. Our stories carry our memories and memories are conveyors of grace." The stories in this volume convey the grace of encountering the presence of God among the daily details of Lasallian life, reflecting different ways of understanding what is meant by the presence of God. There are also a few contributions that may not relate a specific instance of such an encounter but rather give us a thoughtful reflection about the presence of God. Several offer profound theological ideas of what the presence of God means for us today. Most hold up unique experiential moments when God has graced us with an opportunity of encounter, often during the course of our regular ministry. As such, they are indeed a kind of glue that binds us to one another and to our common Lasallian mission.

The observation of Brother John Crawford, FSC, one of the editors of this volume, about the variety of these stories is worth sharing. “Sometimes these experiences have occurred in natural phenomena, but more often these blessed moments have happened on the holy ground where we Lasallians labor, in classrooms and offices and during the daily performance of our duties. Sometimes, the awareness of God present to us overwhelms us in an instant. On other occasions, we experience God’s presence over an expanse of time and through multiple daily interactions. No matter how God has been encountered, each of the essayists in this volume has attempted to capture in our always incomplete words some sense of God ever present.”

Prayer, God’s presence, and personal experience coalesce in these stories and are shaped into eloquent realities that defy easy distinction. Perhaps this is to be expected whenever there are genuine encounters with or within God’s presence. It makes it all the more significant that the contributors to this volume took the time and effort involved in putting their experience on paper. There is always a risk that what is described might be misunderstood or not fully appreciated. For each of the writers, the profound impact of their experience not only overcame their caution in being willing to share it, but the story itself also compelled them to share it with others, as all good stories do. Different writing styles or emphases or expressions may be used by different writers, but these give character to the stories rather than detract from their validity.

Each story also carries an element of enthusiasm that has the impact of a five-year-old running into the house, just bursting with eagerness to share what was seen or experienced. Listening to the story, or reading such stories in the case of this book, will gladden our hearts and stir in us the desire to pursue the same. This is the kind of enthusiasm that De La Salle tells us God has for us, whether in the schools (“Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God”), in the students (“Recognize Jesus beneath the poor rags of the children”), in prayer (“How happy I



am, O my God, to find you always present”), or in anything else (“We know God by faith, and charity makes us love him”). We are privileged to be able to witness some of the ways that such enthusiasm is experienced and lived in the Lasallian world today.

Thanks go to the Publications Committee of the Lasallian Region of North America, where the idea of this book took form, and especially to the editorial committee—Brother Timothy Coldwell, FSC; Brother John Crawford, FSC; Denis de Villers; Elizabeth Moors Jodice (who provided significant support, coordination, and oversight); Marianne Stich, AFSC; and Brother George Van Grieken, FSC. The 131 submitted stories were individually assessed for a variety of qualities according to a standard rubric, with the results compiled for subsequent discussion and consideration. A series of meetings determined a final list of 52 stories, one for each week of the year. Thanks also to Brother Donald Mouton, FSC, and Brother Leonard Marsh, FSC, for translating stories submitted in French and Spanish, and to Saint Mary’s Press for editorial assistance, design, layout, and production of the book.

Our very special thanks to all those who shared their stories. God’s story with us is never finished, and one book of collected stories is never as important as each individual person’s story in God’s presence. May this collection of stories help you continue to write your own.

“This I believe, O my God,  
that wherever I go I will find you,  
and that there is no place not honored by your presence.”

—Saint John Baptist de La Salle  
*(Explanation to the Method of Interior Prayer)*

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Brother George Van Grieken, FSC." The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Brother George Van Grieken, FSC  
May 15, 2018  
Solemnity of Saint John Baptist de La Salle



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# Reflections

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# Instruments of God's Grace

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**I**t was sometime during the school year 2007–2008. It was a normal school day, and I was doing the usual thing—observing the class of a new teacher at La Salle Academy in Providence, Rhode Island. As I sat in the back of a United States history class, I noticed that the young man sitting next to me, a junior, did not have his textbook with him. During the 50-minute class he looked as if he were paying attention but seemed to do nothing but “look.” At the end of class I saw him in the hallway and said to him (I did not know his name) that I expected more of him. And that was the start of a relationship that exists till this day.

During that year he frequently stopped by my office to chat or just to sit. At the end of the year he sent me a copy of an essay he was preparing for college admissions. In that essay he wrote about our budding relationship: “Talking with Brother Fred got me thinking. If his presence in my life meant so much to me, then maybe I can make a difference in other people’s lives.” Later in that essay he wrote about his relationship with God: “I believe that God put me here for a reason, and I want to be an instrument of his peace. Being close to God affects everything I do.” I was moved by the actions of God in this young man’s life and the way in which God used me as an instrument of grace.

However, it was early in his senior year that God’s presence was revealed even more deeply. This now-senior stopped by my office after I had offered morning prayer for the school on the public address system. He remarked that he liked the prayer very much. I thanked him and asked him if he prayed. He said that of course he did. In fact, the night before he had written a prayer. I asked him if he would share the prayer with me. In typical

teenage fashion he ripped a scrap of paper from his notebook, asked for a pencil, and wrote down his prayer. It read: “Let God’s breeze pass through your window and fill your home so that not only you breathe him in, but everyone who enters.” I was deeply moved by the words—so simple and yet so profound. He succinctly captured what it means when we say, “Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God.”

To this day that scrap of paper is under the glass on my desk, to be seen each morning as I bow down to kiss my desk and to remember that God is present—in this office, in each person who enters, in the depths of my own being. Over these years, this young man and his words have been instruments of God’s grace in my life.



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**Brother Frederick C. Mueller, FSC**

La Salle Academy, Providence, RI

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# The Students Continue to Teach Me

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**I**t was dark in the De La Salle Chapel. Fourteen hours earlier, this summer school class had met in the same chapel for the 6:00 a.m. Mass. The sun had been shining at that time, and a full day of “when I was hungry . . . thirsty . . . naked . . . a stranger” awaited the students.

Now the day was almost over, and the only light in the chapel came from a single candle embossed with the phrase: “Remember We Are in the Holy Presence of God.” Everyone was tired, most were touched by what had happened that day, some were sharing. As their teacher for this 24-hour immersion class on urban poverty, I was inspired by their resilience. It was time for the teacher to become the student. What would they teach me? What would the teacher learn from the students?

I started the evening prayer service by asking, “Where did you meet Jesus today?” Was it on the city buses that took us from place to place? Did you see him on the other side of the serving line at the soup kitchen? Did you see him in the faces of the people you prepared lunch for with your own money at the homeless shelter? Was it at Catholic Charities, when you helped that lady take her food to the car? Maybe you found him when you toured the local homeless shelter and heard the man tell his story of clawing his way back to dignity from drug abuse, divorce, and unemployment. My students started teaching me where I can find Jesus.

“I found Jesus at the bus station. While we were sitting around waiting on our bus, I noticed people that were in need putting others’ needs before their own.”

“I saw him in my classmates’ smiles and extra efforts.”

“He was in the supervisor of the soup kitchen, who does this every day with a smile.”

“I saw him in the lady at Iron Gate [Soup Kitchen] when she gave me a napkin with all her favorite Bible verses on it.”

“I saw him at the bus depot in the son of the woman who shared her music with us.”

“I found Jesus in the people eating at the Iron Gate Soup Kitchen. Having the opportunity to see so many unfortunate people was an amazing experience. I saw so many people that were so thankful and happy that we were serving them, even in spite of their situation; just like Jesus on the cross.”

As this day ended, I knew that before the summer class was over, these young people would have similar reflections when we left a prison, an immigration center, a mosque, a mental health clinic, and a small Baptist church where the minister would share his stories of racism growing up black in America.

I also knew that my students would continue to teach me that “we are always and everywhere in the holy presence of God.”



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**Ken Coughlin**

Bishop Kelley High School, Tulsa, OK

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# Treated as if I Belonged

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The first time I walked through the halls of a Lasallian school, it had been eight years since my last teaching experience. After many years of working in parish ministry, I was living in Denver, Colorado, and returning to the classroom as a high school theology teacher.

Making the decision to leave parish ministry and return to teaching was difficult. I was comfortable with my role and surrounded by people of faith who were also my friends. But the circumstances of my job and the gentle nudging of the Lord were inviting me to something new. At the time, I didn't know what a "Lasallian" school was, and I had never heard of Saint John Baptist de La Salle. I simply knew that there was a Catholic high school that needed a theology teacher, and that I was a person who needed a place to belong.

I was new to teaching high school students, and I was new to teaching theology. I could hardly find my way around the building and taught in several different rooms, so that I had to move each period like the students. I could remember only a few of my colleagues by name. I didn't even know who to ask for help. As I began my first day of school, I was afraid.

I was walking through the hall during a passing period with my arms full of papers, books, and supplies. The hall was crowded with students, and I wasn't sure how to find my next classroom. But I knew I had to hurry, because I needed to get there, set up, and be ready to teach as soon as the bell rang.

Preoccupied with all these worries, somehow my papers got away from me, scattering across the floor. I thought for sure that I would have to protect my things from students who would

mindlessly walk all over them, that I might get knocked down while bending over in the crowd of students. Certainly they would be laughing at me.

But students I didn't know stopped and began picking up my things. Not only did they gather my things for me and ask me if I was all right, they offered to carry my things to my classroom. "Where can we take these for you, Ms. Niblack?" they asked.

These young men and women called me by name and treated me as if I belonged there. That was the moment that I knew I had found a home. It was my first glimpse of what it means to be a Lasallian inclusive community. Students I didn't know, knew me and were willing to go out of their way to take care of me, to help me, and to make me feel welcome. That was the moment that I knew how present God was to me, in bringing me to my new job—no, my vocation—as a Lasallian educator. I had found a home.

That one experience led me to develop an induction program at my school to welcome new teachers, so that other new teachers might also experience the holy presence of God through others.



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**Rita Niblack**

Mullen High School, Denver, CO

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