

ANIMO BURNS BRIGHT IN LA SALLE VIETNAM

Last August 8, 2018, La Salle Alumni in Vietnam held their Annual Reunion in Mai Thon, Ho Chi Minh City. For the first time in the history of their Reunions, they invited delegates from the Asia Pacific Region. In a strong show of support for La Salle Vietnam, the affair was attended by 3 delegates from Japan, headed by Itoh Tsunetoshi, Board member of UMAEL (World Union of La Salle Former Students); 3 from Thailand; and 17 from the Philippines. Among the Philippine delegation were Mr. Johnny Sy, President of the Federation of La Salle Alumni Associations in the Philippines; Mr. Henry Atayde, Executive Secretary of PARC; Mr. Leandro Atayde III, representing La Salle Greenhills Alumni Association; and Mr. Martin Ternate, President of the De La Salle Lipa Alumni Association, who led the biggest delegation of 12!

Our first encounter with the Vietnamese Lasallian Alumni was during the 3rd UMAEL-PARC Leaders congress held during the celebration of the DLSAA National Congress in De La Salle Lipa last June 2017. The UMAEL-PARC Leaders Congress is the avenue for Lasallian Alumni Leaders in the Asia-Pacific Region to meet, form bonds, and align efforts to contribute to the Lasallian Mission. From that time on, the La Salle Vietnam community became committed to sustaining relationships with the international Lasallian community. They have even guaranteed their attendance in the next UMAEL-PARC meeting which will be held in 2019 at Miami, Florida, coinciding with the UMAEL World Congress.

Before the Reunion program started, Br. Peter Nguyen Van Phat (Brother Visitor of the District of Vietnam) and Br. Andrew Ho Quoc Thang (Brother Auxilliary Visitor of the District of Vietnam) shared the remarkable history of the brothers and former students in Vietnam. They recounted that it was in 1866 when six French brothers first came to Vietnamese shores. For the next 100 years, the Lasallian mission flourished as 23 schools were established all over the country. However, in 1975, radical changes in the country's socio-political situation led to the nationalization of all those schools. The government took over, and the brothers were no longer allowed to run the schools, like shepherds without sheep. They likened their journey to that of the Israelites wandering 40 years in the desert, struggling to keep their resolve no matter the difficulties and challenges that befell them. For the past years they have been doing everything within their power to stay true to the mission – they set up informal educational services such as tutorial centers, boarding houses, vocational education, and catechism at their local parishes. They used all possible avenues within the bounds of the communist regime so that they could continue to educate the children in Lasallian values, especially the underprivileged.

Learning about their past and the fact that there have been no official La Salle schools in existence for the past 43 years, we realized that the Reunion we had attended was no ordinary one. Imagine the untiring determination, boundless patience and unwavering hope it must have taken the brothers to pursue their mission in the midst of danger, uncertainty, and even poverty; and the incredible impact Lasallian education must have had on their students for their alumni to celebrate their homecoming in the absence of their physical “home”. As Br. Peter described, “Many properties were lost after 1975, but our heritage which is the Lasallian spirit stands the test of time”. Not only have they survived, but they have thrived – their vocations are steadily increasing; and with the help of the alumni, they are about to open a school for ethnic minority children.

As we witnessed the Reunion program, we realized how truly fitting their theme was as it described who they are -- a “Shining Lasallian Community”. Henry Atayde described it best as he addressed the almost 600 Vietnamese alumni members -- “You are living proof that the Lasallian mission is worth it. We are products of this mission. It lives on after we graduate, and burns even brighter as seen in all the good work you are doing”

The next day, we were again privileged to behold living testaments to the indomitable Lasallian spirit in Vietnam. A number of former students who are living abroad founded a non-profit organization in order to provide better and safer access to schools for hundreds of thousands of students. There are around 500 “Monkey Bridges” along the Mekong River. These are makeshift bamboo bridges which have proven to be dangerous, yielding 300 accidents and 200 deaths yearly.

Through the leadership and generosity of these former students, 243 concrete bridges over the Mekong River tributaries have been built, and they plan to build over 250 more.

The Vietnam experience was valuable reminder of what it means to be One La Salle – how the mission unites us all while celebrating our uniqueness and diversity. Faith transcends religion; compassion overcomes adversity; and the strength community shines through each and every individual – this is La Salle's gift to the world.