

## POSTULANTS' THAILAND ADVENTURES



**THAILAND** - The three postulants of the De La Salle Brothers in LEAD, Lemuel Asunción, Jose Ruben Garcia, and Zennel Sy, went to the Sector of Thailand for a month-long exposure program. Each of them wrote a reflection article which are found on the succeeding pages.

Click the image above to view their recap video on YouTube.



Facilitating an English class with the girls from the Blue Sky Dormitory in Sangkhlaburi, Kanchanaburi

## Doing, Being, Becoming: Reflections on the ministry of teaching during our exposure in Thailand

By Lemuel Asunción

It was a great privilege to be given the opportunity to be exposed to the Lasallian Mission in Thailand as a Postulant of the Lasallian East Asia District. Our one-month trip was filled with exciting and unforgettable experiences in the schools and Brothers' communities in Sampran, Sangkhlaburi, Nakhon Sawan, and Bangna. We learned about the life and ministry of the Brothers as well as how the Thai culture influences their Catholic faith, vocations and initial formation, and the conduct of schools. Among the many activities that we engaged in, I was able to experience the presence of God the most during teaching and learning activities with students, and so I shall focus my reflection on how these shaped my understanding of the

mission. I find it fitting to use the *Doing, Being, Becoming* framework by occupational therapist Ann Allart Wilcock to describe my experience of transformation.



Mealtimes in the La Salle Formation House in Sampran, Nakhon Pathom are opportunities to practice English with the Aspirants

## Doing

My mindset particular to this trip was openness to experience. My objective was to expose myself as much as I could to the Brothers' lives and ministries and the Thai culture because, in the future, this is likely what I will be engaged in. There is also a possibility to be assigned in Thailand given the district's thrust. We were blessed to be given several opportunities to teach, mostly conversational English. In Sampran, it's through chatting with the Aspirants at the formation house; in Sangkhlaburi, it's having informal classes with the Blue Sky Home girls and the La Salle Sisters; and in Nakhon Sawan, it's facilitating sessions for the La Salle Juniorate and fifth-grade students at the La Salle Chotiravi. In *doing* the act of teaching these students, I realized several things. First, language is one small barrier. Despite their challenges in speaking English and with the very little Thai I know, we were able to understand each other most of the time. As long as the intentions are clear, your message will come across. Second, finding a common ground between two different cultures is a good starting point for sharing. We often talk about food and cooking, music, etiquette, and customs. Lastly, when you are teacher, you will always be able to find ways of making your students learn, despite having limited resources. The experience of *doing* the classes provides an initial immersion into the culture of Thai schools,

an opportunity to be acquainted with the learners, and assimilate this particular ministry of the Brothers.



I brought one of our English classes to the kitchen, wherein we also learned to cook a noodle dish

## Being

Somehow, I was able to overcome certain challenges that come with teaching in another culture for an extended period of time. For me, in particular, these are crossing over the language barrier, getting used to actions and gestures which are grounded in etiquette, and being able to modify the learning activities depending on the culture-based responses of the learners. In the repeated process of *doing*, I somehow felt like *being* a teacher of the community and a part of their culture. There was a point when I started to become more comfortable with spontaneity, and this enabled me to further enrich the sessions by surprise. The essence of *being* is being “true to ourselves and our nature” (Wilcock, 1999), and that is exactly how I felt during many interactions with the children inside and outside the classroom. It meant letting go of certain doubts and insecurities, and by doing this, making yourself authentically more available to teach things even beyond what is formally expected. I could say that the learning moments I enjoyed the most were those that we shared outside the classroom, such as the band practice, games, dining room

conversations, and cooking sessions. The past month was a good period of re-discovering myself, affirming my passion for teaching, and validating my decision to join the Brothers,



Postulants Zennel Sy, Ruben Garcia, and I facilitated two fifth-grade English classes in La Salle Chotiravi, Nakhon Sawan

## Becoming

In the end, the goal is not just becoming a teacher but *becoming* a Brother. While recognizing that there is so much more to learn and experience in my formation, I can say that somehow, I got a glimpse of how it is to be a Brother to the Aspirants in the formation house in Sampran, to the girls at the Blue Sky Dormitory in Sangkhlaburi, and to the students at the La Salle Juniorate and La Salle Chotiravi in Nakhon Sawan. And in most of my interactions with these learners, I felt that God was using me to convey his love and grace. I realized that the ministry of presence is so powerful that it precedes teaching; however, it is the ministry of teaching which introduces a Brother into the hearts of the students, allowing them to perceive and understand our presence later on. To *become* a Brother in the context of teaching is to be able to touch the hearts of these people and allow them to know God even in the simplest of ways. I have yet to fully achieve this,

but our short exposure was definitely instrumental in letting me know, even for a tiny bit, how it felt. It was a very humbling experience.



This was taken after one of our English classes in the La Salle Juniorate in La Salle Chotiravi, Nakhon Sawan

This Thailand exposure trip may just be a small portion of my formation, but it sure made a great impact on my relationship with God and my desire to be a Brother. **In *doing* teaching driven by faith, one experiences the state of *being* with God, and therefore *becoming* a Brother who can make Him known to every learner he encounters.**

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Lasallian East Asia District for making this trip possible, especially our Postulancy Director Br. Antonio Cubillas FSC, La Salle Thailand Sector Head Br. Joseph Klong Chai Phuek FSC, and all the Filipino and Thai Brothers who contributed to the success of this exposure.

#### **Reference**

Wilcock, A.A. (1999). Reflections on doing, being and becoming. *Australian Occupational Therapy Journal*, 46, 1-11.

## Without Borders

Jose Ruben A. Garcia

When we were informed about our Thailand exposure, I was initially surprised, since I was accustomed to the idea that exposure programs are generally domestic exposures. One of its main objectives was to foster a culture of “Brothers without Borders”; in this spirit, the Postulants went to Thailand to experience the Lasallian mission and community life in a context different than our own. For our month-long exposure, we got to experience what it meant to create a culture of brotherhood without borders: it meant being able to speak in the language of brotherhood, the language of service, and the language of love. In all of the communities we visited, we speak and act these languages that go beyond our culture and language.



Inculturation, the image of St. John Baptist de la Salle in a Thai spirit house

We arrived on 2 October and stayed at La Salle Sampran, the Thai sector’s formation house where the pre-postulants of the sector study and undergo formation. For the three of us, staying in Sampran was the closest we have to a formation house experience (since our Postulancy program is conducted in active communities). Our encounters with the pre-postulants and the Thai brothers were filled with stories and activities which opened us to one another: we exchanged stories about the Philippines, learned about Thai culture, and the experiences of the pre-postulants. In Sampran, we

experienced the language of brotherhood; it is a language of association that goes beyond our difference in language and culture. The pre-postulants of the Thai sector are in a different context from us, but we share the same experience of discernment. This common bond allows us to share our presence to one another and create lasting friendships.



Singing with the Pre-Postulants at the Carmelite Monastery's Anniversary

We left Sampran for Sangkhlaburi on 10 October. Sangkhlaburi is a six-hour drive from Sampran to the West of Thailand, near the Thai-Burmese border. The Thai sector operates two schools in Sangkhlaburi: a primary school (grades 1 to 6) called La Salle Sangkhlaburi and the La Salle Bamboo school close to the Burmese border. Furthermore, La Salle Sangkhlaburi houses Blue Sky Home, a dormitory for stateless Burmese girls studying in Thailand. In our more than a weeklong stay in

Sangkhlaburi, we had the opportunity to teach the girls English both inside and outside the classroom and bonded with them through games and music. In our encounters with the girls, it was an experience of the language of love: the Lasallian mission is an expression of the language of love for the young. It is a mission which aims to form them into better persons who can create better opportunities for their families.

Finally, we experienced the language of service. Regardless of country, the brothers serve the wider community as a community. The second half of our exposure took us to Nakhonsawan and Bang Na, where the brothers operate primary and secondary schools. In these two schools, we got to see the



brothers in their daily work in the schools and the typical day of a Thai student. Accompanying the brothers in some of their activities, the language of service requires a community that lives in one accord of mind and heart intent on the performance of the work of God in the education of the young. This is the language of service that we experienced in all communities in Thailand.

I am truly thankful for this experience. This month-long exposure strengthened my desire to discern deeply my vocation to the

At the Wat Wang Wiwekaram in Sangkhlaburi

brothers. Moreover, It served a reminder of the reason why I joined the postulancy: to serve God in the educational apostolate of the church.

## 7 Takeaways From My Lasallian Exposure Trip to Thailand



By Zennel Sy Nov.16.2022

[Watch Trip Recap Video](#)

Last October, I was blessed to go on an exposure trip to Thailand with the other postulants, Lee and Ruben. The experience was another providential opportunity for me to leave my comfort zone and the security of familiar surroundings. I am glad I did as it was an encounter to remember, expanding my mind, opening my heart and deepening my understanding of the multicultural and inter-religious context of the Lasallian mission in general, and the vocation of the De La Salle Brothers in particular.

Our formation adventure began on October 2 as we jettied off in the early hours of the morning and landed at Thailand's impressive Suvarnabhumi Airport. The month-long exposure trip brought us to 4 Lasallian communities. Nothing beats the thrill of discovering and the joy of understanding the authentic lifestyle, values and culture of another than by praying together, sharing meals and laughter, engaging in common activities including cooking, manual labor and karaoke, and exchanging personal stories.

La Salle Formation House in Sampran, Nakhon Pathom, was very memorable because of our significant interactions with the Brothers, pre-postulants (college-age candidates to the Brothers) and the staff. La Salle Sangkhlaburi was inspiring because I saw the Lasallian mission to the last, the lost and the least in action as we taught English to the stateless residents of Blue Sky Home and learned about and visited the Bamboo School. La Salle

Chotiravi Nakhon Sawan was very meaningful as it was a representative experience of the whole Lasallian mission as we encountered the Brothers, the primary students, the scholars of La Salle House, the teachers and administrators and the juniorate (high school students discerning vocations to the De La Salle Brothers). Though we didn't get to spend a lot of time in La Salle Bangkok, I found it impressive with its well-developed campus and significant influence in the area. I am deeply grateful to Br. Joseph Klong, Thailand Sector Head, for coordinating and making our exposure trip very meaningful, and to the Brothers from each of the communities who graciously hosted us, heart-warmingly shared their riveting vocational experiences with us and patiently listened to and answered our plethora of questions.

Henry David Thoreau once said that "it's not what you look at that matters. It's what you see." A memorable and formative journey as the one we took in Thailand cannot but leave deep impressions. It makes you think "outside the box". As Mark Twain said:"broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all of one's lifetime." These are my 7 takeaways from this great adventure.

### #1 Find God in all things.

Talk about an incarnational experience of De La Salle's "wherever I go I will find you, my God". I was surrounded by Christianity all of my life up until I went to Thailand. Yet, I beheld God's presence there in a multitude of ways. I saw him in the smiles of the children. I felt him as I watched our Buddhist students engage in meditation. I encountered him in the gentility, generosity and simplicity of the Thai and Burmese people. I saw his influence while looking at the votive offerings of Buddhists in front of the statues of De La Salle. I even sensed a semblance of Christian spirituality in the commonly used Thai catchphrase, "mai pen rai", an expression of their affection, openness, and appreciation which can also mean "don't sweat the small stuff". Of course, it was inspiring to see God's presence in our schools in the significantly visible and beautiful chapels, the Catholic imagery, the practice of Catholic prayers and the presence of the La Salle Brothers and Sisters. Yes, God is everywhere and is in everyone. I knew that. However, it surely was more



transformative for me to learn to recognize him in an environment peculiarly not my own.

## **#2 The vocation of the De La Salle Brothers is still very valuable and relevant today.**

In a time when there is a proliferation of competent educators, the dedication and care of the De La Salle Brothers to the young, especially those in the periphery, continues to offer a distinct “competitive advantage”, so to speak. It is the Brothers’ unique value-add and selling proposition, their *raison d’être*, to the field of education across cultures and nations. The Brothers provide a Gospel-inspired response to the needs of the young as I have witnessed in the Philippines and now in Thailand. Seeing one of our Thai Brothers take the time to console a new nursery student who has been crying for awhile or learning how the Brothers look past seeming tardiness to see a student preoccupied with family affairs or witnessing Brothers work beyond expected hours to look after a house for poor scholars or bond with Lasallian partners were “epiphany” moments for me. That’s what makes the difference. That’s why, God-willing, I hope to be counted among them. Truly, as De La Salle said in reference to the Brothers: “You can perform miracles by touching the hearts of those entrusted to your care.”

## **#3 There is an indescribable joy in working for young people, especially the lost, the last and the least.**

If I am asked to choose what would be the main highlight of my trip to Thailand, hands down, it would be the opportunity to teach, to interact, to share, and to engage the young people. Whether it was going down on my knees to play with the nursery children, energizing Grade 5 students, teaching English to the juniorate, singing the banana song with the scholars of La Salle House, playing “*luksong tinik*” (traditional Filipino game) with the Blue Sky Home girls, or even just “shooting the breeze” with the candidates at Sampran, being with young people particularly those from less fortunate circumstances, taking interest in their welfare, and helping them see their intrinsic value and reach their potential is the place where I feel most fully alive and called to help out. De La Salle Brothers witness to God’s Merciful Love and are available to give every young person that chance in life that education can provide.



**#4 There is more that unites than divides us. Brothers without borders. One La Salle.**

The chance to meet the Brothers in Thailand reinforced in me the concept of unity in diversity. I felt our unity in faith, vision, mission and dedication to the young despite the different ways by which the mission, formation and way of life are practically lived out. There is dynamism, beauty and growth in that diversity especially when it is sensitively recognized, accepted and respected. I also felt a deep sense of belonging and fraternity despite cultural and language differentials as each community of Brothers prepared, welcomed and accompanied us. It was a lesson for me on how we are called to set aside differences and preconceived notions and learn to embrace the uniqueness and value of each person we serve and serve with. We are called to risk vulnerability in order that others may find the welcome, support and accompaniment they need. Truly, Brothers are without borders not just because they are called to be ready to serve anywhere but also because they are called to be a brother to everyone whom the Lord puts in their path ... in their lives.



**#5 It takes a community to teach minds, touch hearts and transform lives.**

One of the attractive aspects of the De La Salle Brothers is their fraternal life in community. I have seen it lived out both in the Philippines and in Thailand. The Lasallian mission could not be achieved as a lone ranger despite how gifted one may be. Interdependence on each other is key. It is easier to respond to the demands of the mission when there is a vibrant and supportive community life where one feels accepted, affirmed and valued. How vital it is then to learn to “die to self” to preserve peace, unity and true brotherhood within the community.



**#6 “Preach the Gospel at all times, and when necessary use words.”**

This quote attributed to St. Francis of Assisi reminds me of the importance of tangible expressions of love and the inadequacy of words at times to bring people together. During my exposure trip to Thailand, this basically became the norm. While the Brothers and some of the candidates spoke English, most of the people we met did not or were hesitant to. However sincere efforts to see the intrinsic value of others and to relate with them as both a gift and bearer of gifts just waiting to be received broke the ice. It prompted



me to find creative ways of connecting with them whether it be finding a common sport to play, learning how to cook Thai sticky rice with mangoes, preparing a Filipino dish, making embarrassing attempts at speaking Thai, searching for the simplest but engaging ways to teach English or even dancing to the students' favorite K-pop songs. Taking the time to show genuine interest in another person builds bridges when language becomes insufficient.

### **#7 Have the courage to take risks.**

Throughout the trip, I realized that in order for me to be immersed in the experience, a high degree of openness, availability, vulnerability and service-mindset together with a significant dose of faith and childlike surrender to the God of surprises were necessary. So, I ate all (well, almost all) the food offered even the street food, observed the customs (particularly removing my shoes in almost every place we entered), entered many Buddhist temples including trekking inside a prayer cave carved high in a mountain, and initiated a multitude of conversations (at times even at the risk of running out of things to say or questions to ask). I am glad that I did. The things I learned, the wonderful people I met, the relationships I was welcomed into, and the new experiences I had are all incomparably more valuable. Prayer and the Sacrament of the Eucharist provided the grace to "be not afraid". De La Salle said, "live by the spirit of faith". I learned more and more throughout my Thailand exposure trip that it is only by doing so that we can be fully alive.

I am very grateful to the LEAD District's formation team and to the Thailand sector for giving the postulants this unique, memorable and meaningful opportunity to learn about the Lasallian mission in a context outside the Philippines. My heartfelt thanks to the Brothers, the candidates, juniorates, the students, the teachers, administrators and staff who received us with open arms and with the widely-known warm hospitality of this land of smiles. These 7 takeaways are just the tip of the iceberg of what I have discovered about the Lasallian mission, about others, about life and about myself. True, with the wealth of information available on the internet, I could have learned these things in the comfort of my room in the Philippines. However, being an "armchair Lasallian" does not bring me into contact with the lived values, beliefs, traditions that shape people's perspectives, provide context and deepen understanding. Acclaimed Indian novelist Anita Desai said "wherever you go becomes a part of you somehow". Learning through experiences shapes or re-shapes us for the better. I have gained and learned so much from my experience in Thailand. I pray that I have also left something positive behind.



#### References:

Karsten, M. (2021, December 20). *50+ best travel quotes to inspire wanderlust (ultimate list)*. Expertvagabond.com. <https://expertvagabond.com/best-travel-quotes/>

Shutterfly Community. (2019, April 3). *80+ travel quotes to inspire your next adventure*. shutterfly.com. <https://www.shutterfly.com/ideas/travel-quotes/>