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Brothers and members of the Lasallian Family,

I have the painful duty to inform you of the death of Br. John Johnston our beloved and respected 25th Superior General. As we all know, his illness which began a little over a year ago obliged him to change a calendar still full of activities in favour of many sectors of the Institute. When I accompanied him last July in Memphis, for three weeks, his will was identified in such a manner with that of God that the only thing which animated him was responding to His mysterious plan of love: 'May it be what God wishes' he often said to me.

Br. John Johnston was a distinguished member of our Institute and had a profound influence on Brothers and Lay Lasallians all over the world. This happened first of all in his religious Province of Saint Louis, Missouri, where he held responsibilities in the formation of young Brothers and where he became Provincial. Later it was as Vicar General of the Institute (1976-1986) and as Superior General for two periods of seven years (1986-2000). For a number of years he was also Vice President of the USG (Union of Superiors General) always defending strongly the value of the vocation of Brother in the Church and participated in three Synods, being Assistant Secretary of the Synod on the Consecrated Life. At the end of his mandates as Superior General he was in charge of the Department of Education of the Lasallian Region of USA/Toronto; he was also in charge of a Foundation for the defence of children and travelled around the Lasallian world giving Retreats and attending Assemblies, Meetings....

I have known Brother John from when he was a Brother Visitor, thanks to his trips to Guatemala to visit the American Brothers who were directing some schools there. Even then I was struck by his strong personality and the authenticity of his life. Brother John was already the Vicar General when the terrible earthquake occurred in Guatemala, leaving more than 20,000 dead. His fraternal visit at that time left me with a profound impression. Afterwards, as we all know, I had the good fortune to become his Vicar General and it was especially at that time that I came to know in even greater depth his exceptional qualities and be enriched by his presence.

I want to share with you for a few moments some of the traits of his personality that have made the greatest impact on me. I have felt Brother John to be a man of convictions, spiritual depth, and profound interior life; his sense of Lasallian values was contagious for all of us and he had an extraordinary capacity for leadership. He always remained close to young people as I was able to observe once again in my recent visit to Memphis last summer, a time when we had an encounter with a group of Young Volunteers with whom Brother John had a beautiful relationship of friendship. Another of his characteristics was his love of the Church, a clear and filial love.

On a personal level, I much appreciate the vigorous impulse that he gave to association with our lay partners and to the shared mission as well as his interest in the rebirth of the Institute in several countries of Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall and his special care for our missionary development in Africa and Asia. A special mention should be made of his concern for the Rights of the Children and his energetic support for Bethlehem University in its service to the People of Palestine. Besides all of this we will remember his visits and his writings which have given such a strong thrust to the renewal of the Institute and its mission.

Finally, I do not want to forget to point out another aspect of the life of Brother John that has been an inspiration for me. It is the love for his family, here present. I saw it as a love expressed with affection, closeness and admiration. I had the chance to share some time with Michael, his priestly brother as well as with Edward and his family during my last visit. Their fondness and mutual support were most impressive. To his brothers and to all of his family, whom I have had the opportunity to know and appreciate, I present in

the name of the Institute, my most sincere condolences, knowing that beyond the sorrow of your separation, what must most stand out for you is a justifiable pride in this exceptional Brother who, as the Gospel expresses in speaking of Jesus, *Went about his life doing good.*

At the end of our 43rd General Chapter in a session of homage to Brother John, three Brothers that stood as representatives of the three official languages of the Institute, expressed the appreciation that we all felt for his person at the time when he was completing his ministry of animation for the Institute in the year 2000. Permit me to cite some of those testimonies:

Brother Jacques d'Huitem, at the time Provincial of France and now General Councillor said: *An understanding man yet firm, never superficial. His pastoral letters underscore criteria for what is essential to move forward. They attract us by their clear reflection. I value his respect for the diverse Regions of the Institute, encouraging us to respond to the challenges that all of us have.*

For his part Brother José Manuel Agirrezabalaga, at the time Visitor of the Central District of Spain, added; *Brother John has helped us to look both at the present as well as the future in a proactive way. His themes have been the Defence of the Rights of the Child, the new apostolic commitments for the poor, the Lasallian perspective of today's reality and a creative fidelity to wipe out the separation between words and deeds.*

And finally, Brother Thomas Johnson, Vicar General today, who was the Regional Coordinator for the United States and Toronto, affirmed: *He speaks with passion for the rights of children. He knows the Brothers by name and encourages them. He knows when to move forward slowly: serene yet passionate. I have valued his vision, his ability to adapt and his realism.*

We had the joy of having Brother John with us during the first week of our 44th General Chapter. We all recall with feeling his intervention on the centrality of our Vow of Association for the Service of the Poor. In that memorable occasion Brother John shared the new manner in which he himself was living this association because of his sickness. These were his words:

As of last October I understand and esteem association in a new way. Before that time I had experienced association as the communion of persons united in their commitment for the Lasallian mission. However, for the past six months I have had an experience of association that I hadn't felt before. The number and the contents of the messages I've had through e-mails, letters, cards, telephone calls, visits and so on, from Lasallians, both Brothers as well as lay persons, have truly been astonishing. The affectionate expressions of concern from so many have profoundly moved me. I now have a deeper understanding of association because I have experienced it in a new way. And opening his heart he asked us to pray for him, that I may be able to say YES to what God asks of me now and in the future. I ask that you pray that I can drink of the chalice that the Lord asks me to drink. For me this is all that following Christ means.

I would not want to end this brief biographical note, which will be followed later by one of our Circulars without thanking the Community of CBU of Memphis for the brotherly accompaniment that you have given to Brother John in these last months of his life. I have been so struck by the witness of fraternity, attention and support that in every moment you have shown as true Brothers. My gratitude also for your wonderful nurse, Pat Bader, who has been a real guardian angel for John.

Fraternally in De La Salle

Br. Álvaro Rodríguez Echeverría
Superior General FSC