

The experience of association of Signum Fidei members During the Pandemic

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Abstract

Lasallian association is borne out of the commitment of St. John Baptist de La Salle and the first Brothers to bond together for the mission of providing a human and Christian education to the young, especially the poor. This dynamic spirit of association has inspired lay partners to share in the charism, mission and spirit of the Institute through a deeper commitment and involvement led to the creation of Signum Fidei Association. This lay organization nurtures the spirit of association among its members through formation and accompaniment, community building and service through its different apostolates. But as the Covid-19 pandemic struck, programs and activities of the Signum Fidei had to be responsive to the needs of its members for it to continually live its charism. This qualitative phenomenological study describes the experiences of association of Signum Fidei members during the pandemic. Co-researchers identified this moment of crisis as life-changing, forcing them to be creative to sustain the lay association, inspiring them to serve others despite the risk, and emphasizing the importance of spirituality and accompaniment. This study also highlighted the spirit of association as anchored on Lasallian spirituality, as a shared experience in community, and is always directed towards mission. In the end, the study pointed out that the Covid-19 pandemic may not be the last crisis the world will experience. Every day, each one also experiences different kinds of crises. Thus, Signum Fidei needs to be creative and dynamic in living out its charism and mission by being responsive to the signs of the times.

Keywords: Signum Fidei, Lasallian mission, pandemic, association, lived experiences

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1. Introduction

Association is an essential element in the Lasallian mission. “It refers to bonds of unity and mutual solidarity rooted in a shared commitment to the Lasallian mission and charism” (Pilgrims Handbook, 2019, p. 64). It also comes from Lasallians' openness to bond with the educational mission as its goal. This solidarity of Lasallians for a common project can never be separated from its mission component expressed through the core values of faith, service and communion (Circular 461, 2010). From an inward individual and communal experience of discernment and reflection of God’s will, this is “then directed outwards towards a world in need of this charismatic gift of educational service” (Pilgrims Handbook, 2019, p. 15).

The teaching of the Church on the doctrine of the Triune God is a foundational source of the importance of the communal nature of human relationships. This doctrine does not only teach about the “loving outreach of the Son and Spirit who are at work in the world to reconcile all people to one another and the Father” (Lasallian Guiding Principles on Association, 2009, p. 27) but also, God’s loving and compassionate relationship to human beings (Pilgrims Handbook, 2019.) In the Lasallian heritage, the birth of the spirit of association can be traced to 1680 when the Christian Brothers formed a community to create the Society of Christian Schools which in 1725 was approved as the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools (Circular 461, p. 2010). The heroic vow of 1691 of St. John Baptist de La Salle, Gabriel Drolin and Nicholas Vuyart, and the lifelong commitment by 12 Brothers in 1694, gave the spirit of association its more definitive character.

Today, association plays a vital role in propagating and sustaining the Lasallian mission which is present in more than 80 countries. While this is anchored in the founding story of the Institute, this is also very dynamic in terms of the local educational contexts and sensitive to the cultures of the different Lasallian communities. In Circular 461 (2010) entitled “Associated for the Lasallian Mission...An Act of Hope”, a worldwide survey in the Institute was conducted to document and describe the variety of ways that association is experienced. It shares five common elements of association which are: 1) Association exists for the mission, 2) Association implies being a member of a community for the mission, 3) Association results from experience and is a dynamic journey, not an acquired status, 4) Association stems from faith, vocation, and state of life, and 5) Association presupposes a freely made commitment. These elements describe how the spirit of association is lived out and shared by Lasallians today.

1.1 The Signum Fidei Association

Inspired by the life and works of St. John Baptist de La Salle, association is experienced, lived and shared in different levels and involvement within the different Lasallian educational ministries and communities. Through the years, the Lasallian mission has evolved from a mission solely by the Brothers to a “‘shared mission’, [that is], laypersons sharing in the Brothers’ mission, to Brothers and partners sharing in one Lasallian mission” (Lasallian Guiding Principles on Association, 2009, p. 27).

One of these expressions of living out the spirit of association for the mission through new forms of community life among lay partners is the Signum Fidei (SF) Association (Signum Fidei Style of Life, 2013). With the desire to live a more committed style of life, lay partners in 1970 asked the Brothers of the Christian Schools to share with them the Lasallian spirit, charism and mission. Through formation, accompaniment and eventually consecration, inspired by the vows the Brothers make, Signum Fidei members commit themselves to be bearers and sharers of the Lasallian spirit in the context of their work and involvements in the educational communities where they belong, “together and by association”. As individuals, “they strive to be a visible sign of [God’s] presence in their families, professions, schools, socio-political and Church realms; thereby, they

participate in the Mission of the Church” (Gatdula et al, 2022, p. 2). They live their vocation according to the teachings of St. John Baptist de La Salle, nurture their faith through prayer and reflection of the Scriptures, community building and accompaniment, and commit to a life of service through different apostolates (Signum Fidei: Looking to the Future, 2017).

1.2 The Covid-19 Pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic is the most challenging global health crisis the world has experienced in recent years. Originating in China, the spread of the virus in 2020 was so fast and so fatal that the world experienced for the first-time lockdowns on a global scale. Millions were isolated, workers shifted into work-from-home modality, industries were shut down, jobs were lost, and many were infected. The World Health Organization (WHO) reported that around 7 million died and more than 700 million were infected with the virus. Its economic impact was also very serious for many people lost their jobs or had to suffer financially from pay cuts and many businesses went bankrupt. The pandemic has led to an increase in economic inequality, and many went into poverty (World Bank, 2022). Lockdowns were implemented which adversely affected the mental and emotional well-being of people. Many people were reported to experience “psychological distress and symptoms of depression, anxiety or post-traumatic stress and worrying signs of more widespread suicidal thoughts and behaviors, including among health care workers” (WHO, 2022).

One of the first to close and has been greatly affected by the pandemic is the sector of education. To contain the spread of the virus and protect the vulnerable sector of children, educational institutions temporarily closed which was actually “detrimental to the education and well-being of many young people” (Del Castillo, 2024, p. 539). Schools due to the number of students and the different physical activities therein, were identified as places where the spread of the virus may become uncontrollable. As a response, classes had to shift online, and teachers had to learn in a very short period the new educational modality. Many schools were therefore unprepared for the sudden adjustment which negatively affected both students and teachers and became disadvantageous to the unprivileged (Chin et al., 2022; Bernardo, et al, 2023).

While the spirit association focused on a traditional understanding of solidarity, unity and journeying together as Lasallian educators, the pandemic and consequently, the lockdowns and its many other adverse effects, have brought the living out of this spirit in a very challenging situation. This study was therefore conducted to describe the experience of association of Signum Fidei members during the pandemic. It also provides insights recommendations on how to strengthen this spirit, especially during moments of crisis.

2. Methodology

This study used a qualitative phenomenological method as presented by Moustakas (1994) to capture the essence and “understand [the particular] human and social phenomena” (Ramirez, 1983, p. 145) that the co-researchers experienced. Phenomenology started from the works of existentialist Edmund Husserl and was a result of his desire to arrive at a philosophy devoid of presuppositions and prejudices (Greetham, 2006; Garcia & Bernardo, 2022) while at the same time, using a more humanistic approach by meeting where the experience truly is and not where we want it to be (Conklin, 2014). This philosophy was further developed and expounded by other existentialists such as Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sarte and Merleau-Ponty (Gatdula, et al., 2022) who delved into hermeneutics and used reflection as an important tool to arrive at the essence of a phenomenon.

The five (5) co-researchers in this study are all Lasallian lay partners and consecrated members of the Signum Fidei Association in the Philippines. They have been members of Signum Fidei for more than 15 years with four of them able to exercise leadership positions in their respective faith communities. Four (4) of the co-researchers are female and one (1) is male. In terms of geographical representation, three (3) are from Luzon, one (1) is from Visayas, and one (1) is from Mindano. The study used purposive sampling and the co-researchers voluntarily participated in this study signing an informed consent form. They were also free to withdraw from

the study anytime they wanted. Pseudonyms were used to ensure the anonymity of the co-researchers: RJ, Riza, Angie, Geli and Kathy

Using epoché, or the process of suspending biases and pre-judgements, experiences were looked at reflectively during the gathering of data “to explore the complex world of lived experiences from the actors’ (those who live it) point of view” (Qutoshi, 2018, p. 220) and understand these at a deeper level of consciousness. Individual in-depth interviews, using bilingual language, were conducted online through Zoom using a semi-structured interview format. Interviews were then recorded and transcribed. The vast amount of data was analyzed by listing and grouping significant statements and eliminating those that are not related to the experience in focus by validating these with the transcript, with the co-researchers and existing literature. These were organized into two themes: 1) the first thematic reflection, which shows the individual and composite textural descriptions describing the experience such as significant statements and thoughts expressed by the Signum Fidei members, and 2) the second thematic reflection, which contains the individual and composite structural themes such as the underlying thoughts and consciousness of the experiences of the co-researchers arrived at “by looking at different perspectives (imaginative variation)” (Gatdula, et al, 2022, p. 4) that represent the essence of the experience (Crewell, 1998).

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 The First Thematic Reflection

The following in Table 1 shows the clustered significant themes taken from the statements and experiences of Signum Fidei members describing their experience. The table also shows the meaning of their experience of association during the pandemic.

Significant Textural Themes	Meaning
The pandemic is a life-changing experience.	The experience of the co-researchers during the pandemic was very difficult as some of them and their family members contracted the virus. The experience of isolation was challenging, some friends and relatives passed away and there was fear for the uncertainty of the future. The usual face-to-face programs and activities and programs of the Signum Fidei were also initially stopped. For others, the pandemic challenged them to take risks in helping others and doing apostolates despite the danger of contracting the virus.
The support of Signum Fidei was actively felt during the pandemic.	The co-researchers felt the active support of Signum Fidei through prayers, counseling, visits, online formation sessions and regular communication through mobile and online platforms. Basic goods, medicines and referrals for medical concerns were also shared. Service to one another was felt especially by members who needed it most.
The pandemic was an opportunity that strengthened the spirit of association and service.	The co-researchers saw the challenges brought about by the pandemic such as isolation, fear for the future, sickness and health concerns as instances that strengthened the sense of unity and solidarity among members. These were expressed through their genuine care for and accompaniment of one other. Service programs, out-reach and apostolate activities were also conducted.
Faith is very important in moments of crisis.	The co-researchers held on to their faith and prayer life during the pandemic. Individual prayers and online prayer sessions facilitated by Signum Fidei for members were sources of strength and comfort. Formation programs also helped them process their experiences and find meaning on the situation they were in.
Creative efforts were used to cultivate the spirit of association.	The co-researchers expressed that despite the many limitations the pandemic has brought about, the Signum Fidei creatively responded to the crisis by using online modalities for prayer gatherings, formation sessions and assemblies. Social media was also maximized in

	communicating with members and for online formation. Some members initially struggled to learn the new online modalities.
The support of Brothers and school administrators is essential.	The co-researchers emphasized the importance of the support of the Brothers and school administrators to deepen the sense of association in Signum Fidei. This could be in the form of accompaniment from the Brothers, budget support, promotion of the programs of Signum Fidei, encouraging employees to join the association and creating school policies supportive of the growth of the Signum Fidei.

3.2 The Second Thematic Reflection

The six textural themes from the first thematic reflection were reflectively analyzed and presented into three core structural themes reflecting the deeper meaning behind the experiences of Signum Fidei members.

Association is anchored on Lasallian Spirituality. The co-researchers saw Covid-19 as a life-changing experience. From a normal life, everything abruptly changed into a situation that no one had ever experienced before. Some of the co-researchers felt the fear of being infected with the virus or that of their family members. The uncertainty of the future and the fragility of life brought tremendous fear and anxiety, especially for the elderly. The isolation for many months from friends, relatives, leisure activities and work due to the lockdown was very stressful and created a sense of paranoia. Angie shared that she was one of the first persons to be infected with the virus in their province and had to be isolated for two months with her husband in a facility far from the city and far from her family. During this very challenging moment, Angie expressed that,

“the spirit of faith and communion from the SF pushed us up because we were so down. We were afraid that time. And after that one, when we arrived in school in September already, we continued with our daily prayer.”

RJ saw the importance of sharing this gift of faith among Signum Fidei members during this moment of crisis which served as a support system for everyone. While each one has his/her ways of expressing this gift of faith, he explained that in Signum Fidei, this gift of faith has a strong community characteristic. The pandemic did not stop members from praying together, gathering for moments of reflection and sharing, and constantly asking for the intercession of the Blessed Mother through the regular praying of the rosary. They prayed together, prayed for each other and prayed for others. All of these are done online and attended by members either as local faith communities, as a region, or on a national scale.

Amid distress and restlessness, it was their faith in God and prayer life as a Signum Fidei community that comforted them. Their dedication to the association on the other hand provided a sense of stability and direction. Their acts of service to their fellow Signum Fidei members and others in the community who needed much help despite exposing themselves to the risk of sickness or death is the concrete expression of their faith in God and their living out of their Lasallian identity and response to the mission of “providing a human and Christian education to the young, especially the poor.” Therefore, this spirituality is not only about the integration of one’s spiritual life to the living out of the commitment to cooperate in the salvific action of God in the world, but is fundamentally anchored in the life and vision of St. John Baptist de La Salle (The Pilgrim’s Handbook, 2019, p. 66).

This is what Liza and Karen meant when they always highlight St. La Salle and the Lasallian teachings as sources of inspiration in the spirituality they live out as Signum Fidei members during the pandemic. For them, the life and teachings of St. La Salle, who also experienced moments of crisis, serve as a guide in their daily reflection on God’s presence in their lives and the world, and in building and nourishing the relationships among members of the association. St. La Salle’s response to the signs of the times moves them to take risks in service for others during the pandemic and think of new ways how to follow the teachings of the Gospel of visiting the sick, clothing the naked and feeding the hungry. A connection on a personal level and of the Signum Fidei

community as a group, to the life and experience of St. La Salle is necessary to grow in this spirituality (Gatdula, et al., 2022) which is constantly nourished by the different Lasallian formation programs. Thus, for Riza, Lasallian spirituality is integrated into all the activities and programs of Signum Fidei.

Lasallian Association is a Shared Experience in Community. The experience of association of Signum Fidei members during the pandemic is always in the context of a community despite the isolation. Inspired by the same experience of De La Salle and the first Brothers, who chose to live together and trust in God's providence in the face of crises, lay partners deepen their involvement in the Lasallian mission by associating themselves together as Signum Fidei and committing to live out the Lasallian values and identity. "[T]heir very presence in the mission, bring personal and communal life experiences to their service in association and their own experience of community relationships is a significant part of the vital role they play" (Circular 461, 2010, p. 4). This strong sense of community and bond among members was seriously tested during the pandemic when lockdowns were enforced, work shifted to online modality and Signum Fidei activities had to evolve in a way that is responsive to the situation.

a. Shared experience of challenges. Everyone experienced the challenges brought about by the pandemic to different degrees. Some members got infected and others had family members who got sick. Some members lost their jobs especially those who were not yet tenured in schools. Most members struggled financially. And others lost family members and friends. Angie described her experience of getting infected with the virus saying,

"We were placed in a faraway building from the city. We were brought there, and then we were left there. We were not given the right provisions, especially for the food and water, because all the people were afraid of us. So we just kept on crying. But that time, I and my husband, we were always praying that we could really get out of that situation. And it took us almost two months to be away from the city. We were placed there. However, our colleagues from the SF really helped us a lot. They brought the food, the water, coffee, anything that they could give, and then placed in containers, in cartons."

The hardships and difficulties experienced by each member were felt by the whole Signum Fidei community. For Karen, she saw herself as being responsible for the welfare of other members of her faith community. The difficulties she faced during the pandemic made her more empathetic to the plight of her fellow Signum members. On the other hand, the challenges faced by Signum Fidei as an association on how to transition their programs to become responsive to the situation of members working from home were also felt by all members. Members and officers were not trained and prepared for an abrupt shift from face-to-face modality to online and the use of social media platforms for formation. Also, other members do not have the equipment or stable internet connection to be able to participate in the different online formation programs. These challenges made some Signum Fidei faith communities stagnant. With these situations, Geli and Angie saw some members becoming inactive. However, this shared experience of challenges was not something that stopped members from moving forward, rather, they took these as opportunities to learn and provide new ways of strengthening the lay association for "fraternal solidarity is built as teachers share challenges, burdens and blessings together" (Valenzuela, 2022, p. 105).

b. Shared experience of formation and accompaniment. During the pandemic formation programs and spiritual activities did not stop. Signum Fidei continued to provide opportunities for members to nourish their spiritual life and deepen their Lasallian vocation. The accompaniment of members, especially those who were sick, grieving, or going through emotional distress has become a more essential part of the ministry of the members. The formative experience and accompaniment happened on different levels. One is on the level of individual Signum Fidei members like Angie and Karen who in their ways would communicate with other members, check on them, and provide moral support and prayers. Another level is on the faith communities of each school. RJ, who is a faith community leader, said that formation and accompaniment are shared in their SF community through,

“fellowship, talking, storytelling, sharing of our experiences [of] the pandemic, specifically [how] our families are doing. We talk about our brothers and sisters who died, even SF members who died because of the pandemic.”

Another is on the national and international levels through assemblies that were held online. In all of these, the roles of the De La Salle Brothers, the SF Brother Animator and SF leadership were very important in fostering the sense of association of members during this moment of crisis. Angie expressed that De La Salle Brothers checking how they were doing as a community boosted their morale. Being the direct inheritors of the Lasallian mission, Geli on the other hand saw the important role of the Brothers in animating faith communities that experienced dwindling membership. As part of the SF leadership, Riza pointed out that accompaniment is also experienced and shared by helping other faith communities. She furthered that they are called to,

“[be] there during ups and downs of our Lasallian community, whether Signum Fidei or not, and building communities from the strong ones to the those who are beginning, were the reasons why I see there's strong association for SF, especially this pandemic.”

These experiences of SF members journeying together echo the thoughts of Br. Willam Mann FSC (2020) on the importance of accompaniment in the Lasallian community when he said that the first practice of accompaniment and incarnational Lasallian spirituality is to be truly personally present and committed to those entrusted to their care. RJ sums up this experience by saying,

“We have a sense of culture of friendship here. We have been friends for so many years, and that friendship is strengthened through thick and thin. We understand the things that he or she experienced in the past until now.”

c. Shared experience of gratitude. While the pandemic has caused so much distress and disrupted the lives of all, this crisis has allowed SF members to look back on the many blessings they received as Lasallian lay partners. The pandemic moved them to see the many events in their lives with the eyes of faith and gratitude. For Geli, she attributes what she is today to the Lasallian community saying, “It's a personal journey but I always attribute that to my formation in Signum Fidei to be always thankful.” Her commitment to the Lasallian mission opened many opportunities for her, and during the pandemic, she did not hesitate to continue her service in her parish and the diocese. This sense of gratitude is overflowing that she was very supportive of her two children involving themselves in the Lasallian mission: one becoming a Lasallian volunteer and the other as a guidance counselor in a La Salle school. On the other hand, other Signum Fidei members are grateful for being part of the association for they see in it opportunities to serve and help others. The pandemic may have been a very difficult crisis, but for RJ, there were also grace-filled moments that deepened their faith and care for one another as SF.

A very important aspect of this shared experience of gratitude is to always honor those SF members and De La Salle Brothers who worked hard for this lay association to be what it is today. Each community was started and nurtured by those who first responded to the call of “associating for mission”. The co-researchers remembered the former SF leaders and mentors with joy and were very grateful for their guidance and teachings. For Riza and RJ, the commitment of former SF leaders served as an inspiration in continuously building the lay partners' community despite challenges and setbacks and inviting young members of the community to join SF. These mentors, some of which already passed away, showed them how the Lasallian identity is genuinely lived out and what it means to be a “sign of faith” in the world today, especially during moments of distress and crisis. Thus, they feel that this sense of gratitude for receiving the Lasallian mission from those who mentored them is something that they are called to nourish and share with the next generation of Lasallian lay partners.

Lasallian Association is Mission-Oriented. Association in the Lasallian sense is always directed towards service for others. This is fundamentally rooted in the very experience of St. John Baptist de La Salle and the first Brothers, who by their openness to God's call, gathered as a community of lay religious, understanding they are “called by God to participate in the integral salvation of poor and abandoned youth” (Valenzuela, 2022, p.

103).

Signum Fidei members understood that their faith and the formation they received call them to discern the “signs of the times” and direct them outwards into the world in need of help (The Pilgrim’s Handbook, 2019). Despite experiencing personal challenges during the pandemic, SF members still went out of their way to help those who were in need. Karen together with her friends and other SF members collected donations and put up a community pantry for housekeepers; Riza and their SF faith community, despite the health risk, continued to partner and work with Red Cross for medical missions; and others visited and counseled other SF members in their communities. Moreover, the local and national SF communities did not allow the pandemic to stop the prayer and formation sessions for members. They tried to learn the use of technology and social media platforms to continuously serve the members and provide regular formation and prayer sessions on a local, regional, national, and international level. While this technology was very challenging to manage, the leadership innovated and worked together as one SF family. Riza describes the inseparable bond among the three important aspects of the way of life of SF members saying,

“We try to always weigh it in a way that there's always relationship building and there is spiritual growth and social awareness. We try to balance it with the three. If not, we try to focus on faith and then we serve. And then we serve as a community, as an association.”

Lasallian formation and community building are never separate from a life service, especially for the poor.

4. Implications

The Covid-19 pandemic is one of the most challenging crises the world has experienced in recent years that affected millions of people. It disrupted the way of life of many and for the first time made lockdowns and isolation on a mass scale. While the virus at present is no longer causing so much harm due to mass vaccinations, it still poses a threat that should not be taken for granted. Covid-19 was a very serious crisis we were able to surpass, but experts say that it may not be the last of its kind (Gill, 2020). Climate change may usher in a new and more fatal virus in the future. Every day, there are also many kinds of crises that societies face such as economic recessions, political upheavals, geopolitical conflicts, and wars. On a personal level, everyone is prone to everyday crises: emotionally, physically, mentally, and spiritually. These moments of crises being experienced today are reflective of the very experience of association of St. John Baptist de La Salle and the first Brothers more than 300 years ago who saw the plight of the poor and committed themselves to bring God’s salvation by “providing a human and Christian education to the young, especially the poor.”

As inheritors and guarantors of the Lasallian mission, the Brothers generously shared this mission and spirituality with lay partners who in turn were also inspired to deepen their commitment and involvement and associated themselves in solidarity with the Institute and with one another as Signum Fidei (Gatdula, et al, 2022). These lay partners understood that their commitment as Signum Fidei members is not only a way of sharing the mission of the Brothers as active partners in the educational ministry but at the same time, a response to the call of the Gospel of being witnesses of God’s love to one another so that everyone “**may have life, life in its fullest**” (John 10:10, New International Version).

Signum Fidei members see moments of crisis as opportunities to deepen their sense of association strongly rooted in the Lasallian story and teachings of the St. John Baptist de La Salle. Lasallian association is shared among members through their common experience of formation and spiritual activities, community-building programs and apostolates that nourish their Lasallian spirituality. This communal dimension of Lasallian spirituality is very important because it,

“fosters the sharing of [the] educational and spiritual experiences. It also supports joint pastoral activities of service. It is a spirituality of communion that generates community, a spirituality of fraternity and co-responsibility that generates commitment” (Lasallian Spirituality

Today, 2023, p. 51).

As a community of Signum Fidei, their care and sense of responsibility for one another and for the organization come from their shared experience of walking with one another on the journey (The Pilgrims Handbook, 2019) marked with moments of challenges and joy, and a sense of gratitude. While Lasallian association may have been traditionally understood and experienced face-to-face, the pandemic forced SF faith community leaders to creatively respond to the crisis and the needs of members by learning new ways of fostering the spirit of community of Signum Fidei through online modalities. This experience of association is always marked by a zealous commitment to serve others, reflecting on the signs of the times and creatively responding to the needs of the members and of the communities they belong, asking themselves “What does God want from me at this moment?”

The experiences of Signum Fidei members highlighted the importance of association in the organization. Without a strong sense of association, Signum Fidei will not be able to serve its call and fulfill its commitment. Nourishing and strengthening the sense of association in Signum Fidei requires programs and activities that deepen the Lasallian spirituality of members during moments of normalcy and much more during crises. Thus, the organization must always be ready to innovate, be creative, and adjust to the signs of the times. Nourishing the sense of association may be done through regular gatherings that teach SF members about the Lasallian heritage and spirituality, moments for prayer, reflection and sharing, activities that build the bond among members, and apostolates that allow members to share their gifts and live out their commitment through service for others.

Equally important for the spirit of association in Signum Fidei to grow is the accompaniment provided to members and the support by the Brothers and school administration. The active accompaniment of leaders to members, accompaniment among members, and the accompaniment that the Brothers provide strengthen the culture of friendship and solidarity in the lay association. The visible and active presence of Brothers regularly visiting the different Signum Fidei faith communities inspires members in their work and apostolates. On the other hand, faith communities with struggling membership feel inspired to work harder to review their programs, create new activities and invite new members to the group. While Signum Fidei is a voluntary group, the support of the school administration in terms of school policies supportive of the lay association makes the implementation of their programs easier. Budget support is also very important, especially in sustaining apostolates outside of the school community. These practices, and support for Signum Fidei, among others, are essential to ensure the continuity and vibrancy of the educational project for “[t]here can be no Lasallian mission without people who live a Lasallian spirituality” (Lasallian Spirituality Today, 2023, p. 12).

During moments of crisis, it is important to continuously provide formation and accompaniment programs and apostolates to Signum Fidei members using new and effective modalities. The online space which traditionally has been looked down upon as an ineffective mode of formation and service is now a powerful tool to evangelize and build Christian communities. Bishop Virgilio David during the 2024 Philippine Conference on New Evangelization shared that many looked at the online space as only a medium of communication. However, he said that times had changed and that the digital space is also very real and this can always be used to facilitate an experience of God.

The three themes in the second thematic reflection describe the experience of association of Signum Fidei members during the pandemic. These may be used as a model in managing groups and organizations by consciously incorporating spirituality or a sense of purpose, service, and community or camaraderie in its different programs and activities for its members. It must be emphasized, however, that association is not strictly defined by and confined to the three themes, nor should they be seen in a compartmentalized manner. Rather, these three provide an insight into the foundational principles of association and its evolving nature as it adapts to the signs of the times and the different contexts of individual Lasallian lay partners and different Lasallian communities. Its dynamic nature and richness give it the vitality to creatively grow in today’s world while

remaining in fidelity to the first story of association of the St. La Salle and the Brothers. Br. Alvaro Echeverria, former Superior General of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools encouraged and reminded Signum Fidei members of their important role in the Institute and the success of the Lasallian mission saying,

“by your decision to associate yourselves by means of consecration for the Lasallian mission, you give witness to the fact that lay Lasallians today are also the ‘heart, memory, and guarantors’ of the Lasallian charism and mission.” (Signum Fidei Style of Life, 2013, p. 5).

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