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**TWENTY-NINE YEARS
A BROTHER
AND STILL GROWING**

Brother Charles Kitson

Nov. 4, 1993, was a very sad day for me - a day that changed my life. You see, three years prior I had left my position as coordinator of campus ministry at La Salle Academy, my religious brothers' community of seven years on Potters Avenue in South Providence; my theatrical life as organizer of the La Salle Fools; and my friends and family, to serve the people of Guatemala. During these three years, I fell in love with a people, a culture and a spirituality that in this day live in my heart and shape my soul. On Nov. 4, I came home. Or did I?

So many thoughts rushed through my head and played with my heart that cold day in November 1993. I was no longer the frightened, insecure, confused and easily influenced teenager who joined the Brothers of the Christian Schools in the summer of 1966. In those days, I wore a black habit and delighted in being called "Brother Charles." I had left home. I would never be the president of Kitson Chevrolet, my dad's business. I would never have the children my folks had always dreamed of grandparenting (thank God my sister Milly came through with her three great kids!). I would never have a wife. In those days, all of the "nevers" both challenged and excited me. I was ready. I was a dreamer an optimist and an idealist. Walking down the West wing of Newark Airport, I realized that the dreamer, was still very much alive. The Mayan people of Guatemala had blessed me with their power to trust the future because God is good. The optimist had grown. I was taught that there is always *esperanza* (hope). Look for the goodness and don't judge. The idealist had been fired in the kiln of Guatemala injustice and come out more convinced that Jesus' love for the poor has to be our passion. As my family and friends waited for me at the end of that long corridor, who was the man they were going to embrace? I was afraid.

Habit Day, First Vows, Final Vows, Teacher, Vocation Director, Guatemala: all pulsed through my veins as I made my re-entry. There I was in the midst of my

family and friends and all were saying "Welcome home!" But, I thought, I had just left home. The village of El Estor had been my world for three wonderful years. Saying goodbye to those native kids and my De La Salle brothers with whom I had lived and worked tore my heart out. Now, almost 18 months later, I realize that coming home has been a process. And when I think of my life as a De La Salle Christian Brother I see the whole 29 years as a coming home to myself and God. It began first with my family in New Jersey. Then the brothers in high school nurtured it. Once I entered the community, the vision of John Baptist De La Salle, our founder, became my way "home" to myself and to God. And here I am today, ready for the next step in the process.

Not too long after I had arrived back in the United States, I was reading an article written by Benedictine Sister Joan Chittister that appeared in the *National Catholic Reporter*. She was commenting on the rising concern of many Catholics that the religious life as we all knew it is dying. She said it was! What we knew has died and something new is being born. Like the phoenix, new life will emerge from the ashes. But, her question to us as religious men and women is: "What do you want to be caught dead doing?" That statement still haunts and inspires me. I want to be "caught dead" living the gospel that Jesus preached and touching the hearts of young people in the tradition of St. John Baptist de La Salle. I know this is where I belong and I believe that if this is done with a passion, that others too will follow.

Life sure has changed. I now live in a Lasallian Community on Manton Avenue in Olneyville. Brothers Lawrence and James are classmates of mine and we have "grown-up" together during our many years as brothers. However, Licia and Mariesa are new additions. Both are young women who are donating two years of service as Lasallian volunteers. Yes, I live in a co-ed community, and it is a unique experience to say the least. Before I stepped off that plane I had always lived in all-male brothers' communities. Now I am living with brothers and volunteers. Perhaps the phoenix has begun to rise from the ashes. These two women are terrific examples of boundless energy, youthful generosity and a love for the Lasallian tradition of service of the poor through education. They all work in the San Miguel School, a tuition-free schools for boys in Grades 5-8 who have not been able to succeed in many of the public schools in the city of Providence. The school is located off Elmwood Avenue and provides economically disadvantaged children with a structured, creative and caring environment. The school is a result of the brothers' commitment to serve the poor and to meet unmet needs. The dream was Brother Lawrence's. The reality is a miracle. My

community goes there daily in the hopes that it will make a difference. I go too, but I go only in spirit.

I work with the brothers and our lay colleagues at Tides Family Services in Central Falls. After over 20 years of working in a school setting, I am now doing full-time counseling and case management for Latino children and their families. My ministry takes me from house to house in Central Falls, Pawtucket and Providence, caring for immigrant children involved with DCYF, Family Court, the public schools and local police departments. God has blessed me with the neediest kids, much like those our founder loved over 300 years ago. My years in Guatemala not only give me the ability to communicate with these families, they give me credibility and a genuine love for these people. When I got off that plane I was a different person. My life is now defined in terms of the poor and the Latino community. For me, this is no longer negotiable. With them I stand. The brothers have brought me to this place and encourage me to meet the challenge. Without them, I would be lost.

The future of the religious life is not bleak. It may be scary and filled with ambiguity, but somehow I feel that's how the first followers felt about throwing in

their lot with that radical Jewish carpenter. To me, it's exciting and life-giving. Like Peter, I want to say to Jesus, "Where else would I go, Lord?" The De La Salle Christian Brothers are my family. I belong.

I want to conclude with a quote from Alan Paton, who chronicles the fight for freedom in South Africa in his book, "Ah, But Your Land Is Beautiful." Paton describes a black man of some property and middle-class status who finally takes a cautious step into the protest movement. His is risking his hard-won status and a white friend asks him why. The black man said, "When I go up there, which is my intention, the Big Judge (in heaven) will say to me, 'Where are your wounds?' and if I say I haven't any, he will say, 'Was there nothing worth fighting for?'" At 46 years of age, and with 29 years of religious life, I am ready for the fight. The people of Guatemala have shown me their wounds and have invited me to take a stand. Here I am Lord! Home! •

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