

I KNOW

THREE DIFFERENT "FOUNDERS"

Strange as it may seem, the word "Lasallian" in Lasallian Family can puzzle people. It obviously comes from De La Salle, a name which serves as a rallying cry for the members of the Family. But many of these same members have no clear idea at all of who this Founder was, and yet they live according to his "spirit" and take him as their model. They do, of course, know something about his life, but certainly not enough to justify the admiration they intuitively feel for him, nor to imitate him.

And so, who was the Founder...?

The answer is not as straightforward as you may think... As a De La Salle Brother, I know I am supposed to know, but, to tell you the truth, I have come across three quite different Founders... I thought you might be interested in hearing about them.

The "traditional" Founder

Perhaps the best way to describe what I mean is to refer you to a painting of the Founder which used to hang in the hall where I took the habit, in the house of formation at Cambrils, Barcelona. In the picture, the Saint is sitting at a table, there is a sheaf of writing paper in front of him, a goose quill pen in his right hand, and his eyes are fixed on a ray of light shining down from Heaven... On the table in front of him there is a large crucifix and a selection of disciplines... The general impression created is that of a man who is a mystic, rather on the serious side, almost forbidding, a man whose chief concern is to keep the Rule perfectly, a man who lives a life of strict mortification; a man wholly engrossed in writing books like the Rule, the Meditations and the Collection. To say the least, not a particularly attractive Founder for the young person I was then. I did not actually dare to say so out loud, but I thought to myself that St. La Salle could not really be like that... at least, not only like that. To be able to do something for children he would have to be more approachable, less serious looking, less terribly grown-up looking, more childlike, as the Gospel says.

John Baptist de La Salle

And then, as time went on and I read about the fantastic research done by Brother Leon de Marie Aroz; as I read the early biographies of the Founder, especially by Bernard and Maillefer; as I dipped into Blain and the Cahiers Lasalliens, I gradually discovered that there was another John Baptist de La Salle that had been, as it were, kept hidden from us. There is another picture of De La Salle I can describe for you. Perhaps it will surprise you: it certainly surprised me.

* There is this picture of John Baptist, 17 years old probably, already a Canon, dressed up in his choir vestments, very serious looking, quite the young gentleman with his beautifully looked after hair. Bernard tells us also that he was over polite...

* The same biographer says it was difficult to wake John Baptist up and get him out of bed, and that is the reason he would come late for the Office. Funny, isn't it? That is something we did not know...

* He liked good food. When he brought the first group of teachers to eat with him at table, he had a different menu, and it did not worry him in the least. It did not worry the teachers either.

* Rosette, his favourite sister, joined an enclosed convent in Rheims. John Baptist would go to see her much too often and bring her presents quite out of keeping with monastic austerity: there were hampers for community, and especially Mother Superior's, feastday; there was a very expensive crucifix for Rosette's cell, a warming-pan, woollen stockings, books, etc.

* He had a great respect for money. His father left him quite a lot... as well as many forgetful debtors. He set about getting back the money owed him, using the police to deal with those who had simply forgotten, and the Courts for those who refused to pay. By the end of four years, as legal guardian of his brothers and sisters, he had greatly improved their financial situation by recovering a great deal of money. He left a list of outstanding debts for his successor.

* His social standing meant a lot to him. He bought back his father's noble title for himself. There was nothing about this aristocratic canon that foreshadowed the friend of the poor.

* He admires his friend Roland, a canon like himself, for founding a congregation to teach girls. Occasionally he gives him a hand, but there is never any question of his becoming involved personally.

* He thought he was all fixed up for the rest of his life. He had become a priest in spite of a great deal of opposition, not least from the purveyors of common sense—he was the eldest in the family. He was involved in a lot of charitable work. He was readily sought after to preach missions wherever they were needed. He took his priestly vocation very seriously, was faithful to his choir duties, and as legal guardian and elder brother, he put a lot of effort into looking after his brothers and sisters. What more could one ask? He neglected nothing: not his choir service, not his family duties, looking after his six brothers and sisters.

* However, we should point out also all the very positive things about John Baptist: his deep piety, his ability to make friends, his hospitality, his tender affection for his family, his determination, his intelligence, his availability, his apostolic zeal... This will probably be enough for the moment.

Saint John Baptist de La Salle

And here is a third picture which contradicts the second one, and which perhaps seems somewhat disconcerting and astonishing. A few examples will explain what I mean.

* One time when he was travelling along the road to Rethel, some robbers stole his cassock. When they had a good look at it, they discovered it was not worth stealing and they gave it back to him. As for the cassock, some time later, a seminary companion of his, the Archbishop of Chartres, made him accept a more suitable one.

* When he began to feel he was being called upon to make great sacrifices he arranged for the sacristan of St. Remi's church to lock him in on a Friday night, and he would spend the night in prayer.

* Having accepted that he was the "father" of his Brothers, he decided he would eat the same food as they. Bernard tells us he found it impossible, and every time he tried, he vomited. Eventually he decided to starve himself and his appetite in time overcame his disgust.

* Whenever a woman religious asked him to be her spiritual director, he would tell her to get rid first of all the superfluous things in her cell.

* When God asked him he did not hesitate to give up his position as canon and to give away his fortune to the starving poor during the terrible famine of 1684.

* When he was finally convinced that it was God's will, he set about founding the Institute with great determination, with all his intelligence, with his ability to organise and above all with his great capacity for love.

God... wanting to involve me... did so without my noticing it.

Towards the end of his life, the Founder summed up how it had all begun: "Before it all started it was the thing furthest from my mind... Since I considered the teachers I had to employ especially in the early days as far inferior to my foot servants, just the thought of having to live with them would have been unbearable... God who is gentle and wise in all he does and who never forces people... brought everything about without my noticing it... in such a way that one commitment led to another that I could never have foreseen".

Here are some examples of commitments which successfully led him in a direction he could never have foreseen:

* When he was a seminarist at St. Sulpice, Paris, he probably taught catechism. What is certain is that he joined the "league of prayer" started up by a certain Father Bourdoise to ask God to inspire the foundation of an institute of Christian teachers. This priest used to say that whoever undertook to found such an institute would be certain to be canonised.

* At Rheims he had got to know Canon Roland, a very good friend of his, who founded the congregation of the Sisters of the Child Jesus for the education of poor girls. On his deathbed Roland handed over everything to John Baptist de La Salle and asked him to help the Sisters. He did so, obtaining for them letters patent from the King... and thought that that was all there was to it.

* In Paris he got to know Father Barré who belonged to the order of Minims, and who had unsuccessfully tried to found an association of Christian teachers. The coincidence of so many holy people trying to do the same thing must have impressed him.

* There came next his meeting with Mr Nyel on the doorstep of the convent of the Sisters of the Child Jesus. He had come to start up a school like the ones in Rouen for poor children, and was looking for a certain Mr De La Salle, hoping he would be able to help him. A relative of his, a certain Mrs Maillefer, had recommended him... He did what he could, won over the opposition, talked it over with the parish priests, and finally a school was opened,

much to the delight of Mr Nyel and that of Mr De La Salle who was able to get back to his duties as canon, as guardian of his family and so on...

* The teachers hired by Mr Nyel had been done so in a very haphazard way. They lacked the necessary skills and lacked commitment even more. Teaching was just another way, and one of the least sought after, of earning one's living. There was a very fast turnover in teachers... This difficult situation left an impression on De La Salle.

When actually did De La Salle commit himself?

It is difficult to say when exactly, but I think the following three sets of circumstances were of crucial importance in making him decide.

* During the course of his frequent visits to the schools (the one school had soon become several), De La Salle must have realised that although the teachers had absolutely no training, the children were changing and improving. The thought must have surely come to him that one could do such marvellous things if only... God! What an idea!

* Year after year, De La Salle had gone along the streets of Rheims, along Arbalette Street, for example, which led from the Hotel de La Cloche where he lived to the Cathedral and back, and never had his social conscience given any twinges. That is how society was and there was nothing more to be said about it. But one day he must have opened his eyes and seen, actually SEEN, the crowds of children and young people in Rheims (and all over the world) who had no future to look forward to, no chance of education, no chance of ever achieving any kind of human dignity. He must have thought: "How easy it would be..." And the idea was beginning to develop.

* During Holy Week in 1681, he invited the teachers (perhaps a dozen or so) to make a retreat with him. For this generation of teachers, probably the third by that time, this voluntary retreat was like a Lasallian Pentecost. Grace poured down in abundance on to these teachers who had opened their hearts, and they became changed men. The effects of this were seen immediately in the schools which became from then on "Christian schools" without actually yet being called so officially. At that point De La Salle, with great astonishment, must have said to himself: "Well, if that's the way things are..."

* During the very first years of community life with the Brothers of the Christian Schools he was able to observe how they worked and in what spirit; he saw his companions, his "brothers" doing marvellous work in slum districts; he saw some of them die in his arms, saints already, destined for Heaven.

And so he made his decision; and from that time onwards, nothing and no one would be able to divert him from the path he had chosen and which he followed for 40 years, working to found his Institute, in spite of innumerable obstacles.

One day he said:

"If God, when he showed me how much good this Institute could do, had also revealed to me the sufferings and crosses that this would entail, my courage would have failed me, and I would not have dared to touch it with the tips of my fingers, let alone take responsibility for it." "If God had not given his visible support to the Christian Schools they would have been lying in ruins a long time ago."

The nature of a vocation

What we have said should give us some idea how the Founder's vocation developed. I think also that it illustrates that the growth or lack of it, of a vocation depends on the care that is taken of it. I am thinking of writing another article for Lasalliana to examine in more detail De La Salle's vocation... and to reflect a little on the lessons we can learn from it.

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