

**THE COMPLETE WORKS OF
ST JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE
IN A SINGLE VOLUME (2/2)**

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3. Of John Baptist de La Salle

In the 17th century, the idea of literary proprietorship did not exist in its present form. Many spiritual writers refused to append their name to their works for reasons of humility. All extant copies of the the works of St John Baptist de La Salle published before 1719 are anonymous (CL 48, 97).

In the same Cahier Lasallien, Br Yves Poutet has an article which proves beyond doubt that "Monsieur De La Salle, Supérieur des Ecoles Chrétiennes" is the author of nine books submitted to the Chancery on November 2nd 1702 (p.111).

On the other hand, there are other works of which the Founder of the Brothers is simply an editor. This is the case of the "Cantiques spirituels" and the "Psautier de David". No copy of the latter work has been found.

There are some writings, like the "Common Rules" and the "Conduct of Christian schools" which were composed collectively: John Baptist de La Salle is responsible more for the arrangement than for the authorship properly so called of these texts. These are texts, it should be noted, which appeared only in a manuscript form during his lifetime. However, given the role played by him in the Community that composed these texts, which both directed and mirrored its life, it is right that these texts should figure among the works of the Founder.

We can quote in this context a sentence from the Preface to the Conduct of Christian Schools (CE 0,02):

"This Conduct was drawn up in the form of a rule only after a great many conferences (= meetings) with the most senior Brothers of the Institute who were also the most proficient teachers".

The catechisms (Duty of a Christian to God) and the manual of politeness (Rules of Christian Politeness and Civility) are his own work, even if sometimes they clearly draw inspiration from his numerous predecessors who treated the same topic. A detailed study of their sources (cf. Jean Pungier's "Jean Baptiste de La Salle: le message de son catéchisme"), shows a series of deliberate borrowings rather than servile copying. In the same way, the Meditations make use of existing sources, but the applications are always proposed "without recourse to any sources" (CL 47, 39).

We should point out, however, that the only editions of the Meditations and of the Explanation of the Method of Mental Prayer that we know of are those published after the death of the Founder. Without a great deal of research, it is not possible to know the extent to which his followers put the finishing touches to the manuscripts that were not ready for publication at the time of his death.

Certain Letters have come down to us as copies, or printed in a fragmentary form in Blain's "dossiers à thèmes", and with no indication as to whom they were sent.

As for the "Collection of small Treatises for the use of the Brothers of the Christian Schools", De La Salle includes texts taken word for word from other authors, texts which have been adapted to the needs of the Brothers, and other texts he composed himself (see CL 16).

And so, in order to decide in what sense Monsieur De La Salle was "author" of "his" Complete Works, we have to examine each work separately.

4. Complete

We have already said that we do not have a copy of the "Psautier de David". The same is true of the Syllabaire français (CL 48, 167). So these are some of the works published during his lifetime which we do not know.

CL 10 published a "list of writings attributed to John Baptist de La Salle" (pp. 74-151) based on his first 3 biographers. We know the "Memoir on the Beginnings" only from fragments quoted by them, without it always being possible to distinguish between the text of the Memoir and the interpolations of his biographers.

As for the "Memoir on the Habit", all we have is a manuscript which is a rough draft of the final text, which has not come down to us. Blain mentions a memoir supporting reading in French: the 10 reasons he gives for doing so (I, p.375-376) are certainly taken from it, but does he reproduce the original text, and are there any omissions?

The biographers mention many other "memoirs": for a court case in Paris in 1690; for the administrators of the Hôpital de Rouen in 1706; for the young Abbé Clément "on the purpose of the Institute"; for the judges in the Clément case; in answer to a libellous satire directed at him...The biographers could have had access to these documents, but none has come down to us directly. They could have been included in the works of John Baptist de La Salle.

Of the numerous Letters he wrote (certainly at least more than 3,000, and according to some, even more) only 134 have come down to us, and of those about 50 are in the Founder's hand.

There are other documents which bear De La Salle's signature or are even written by the Saint - administrative or legal documents - which are not included in the Complete Works. Apart from his will and a letter to his brother (N 135), in which De La Salle makes provision for the society which owns the schools in Rheims, these writings do not come from him as from a writer sharing his thoughts and experiences, even if they give a valuable insight into his personality and the society he frequented.

And so, are these the complete works? Yes, because they include all the known works. But we should not think that there is an historical and cultural break between us and these writings: this gap is filled by the institutions which have diffused, preserved and transmitted them throughout this time.

John Baptist de La Salle was not a professional writer: his writings were always more or less in answer to a particular need. To understand their significance it is necessary to know for whom each text was written. We return here to the question of literary form mentioned earlier.

In doing so, we have to take into account the various groups of people who have rediscovered his works, have used them, have edited and re-edited them, making them their own and sometimes modifying them considerably. Among these there are in particular the Brothers of the Christian Schools, whose foundation has to be taken into account, since these works were written for it.

5. On the basis of a computerised corpus

The edition we offer is based on printed or manuscript texts which have a high degree of authenticity. They were published in the Cahiers Lasalliens between 1962 and 1965. The Letters were published separately in 1954. To achieve an accurate copy of the original texts these were reproduced photographically. In this way, the printing style and spelling of the times was preserved, but what was gained in fidelity was lost in legibility.

The International Council for Lasallian Studies asked for the "Lasallian corpus" to be computerised so as to enable researchers to work on the Lasallian texts more easily and on a much greater scale. The French-speaking Districts of the Institute funded this enormous task, which was undertaken by the Centre Informatique et Bible at the Benedictine Abbey of Maredsous, Belgium.

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We hope that the difficulties we have mentioned above will not deter our first readers. In fact, in order to make it easier for readers of Lasalliana to tackle these texts and to get more benefit from them, Lasalliana will publish introductory articles on each of the writings of St John Baptist de La Salle under the general heading: "Reading guide to the Complete Works".

What order should we follow in undertaking this exploration? Rather than involve the reader in an orienteering exercise across 1,600 pages, we will simply follow the order in which the works appear. We think this will help the reader to familiarise himself with the various literary forms we have already mentioned.

Those who do not know French, or who do not have a copy of this book, will still be able to use these introductory articles to the works of the Founder: many of these works are, or soon will be, available in their own language, because many Regions of the Institute have a policy of translating these works. Some already exist in more or less complete editions. Let us hope that this work will help many people to come to know the Founder. Comments and questions from readers will help us to cater in a more specific way for the needs that become apparent.