De La Salle

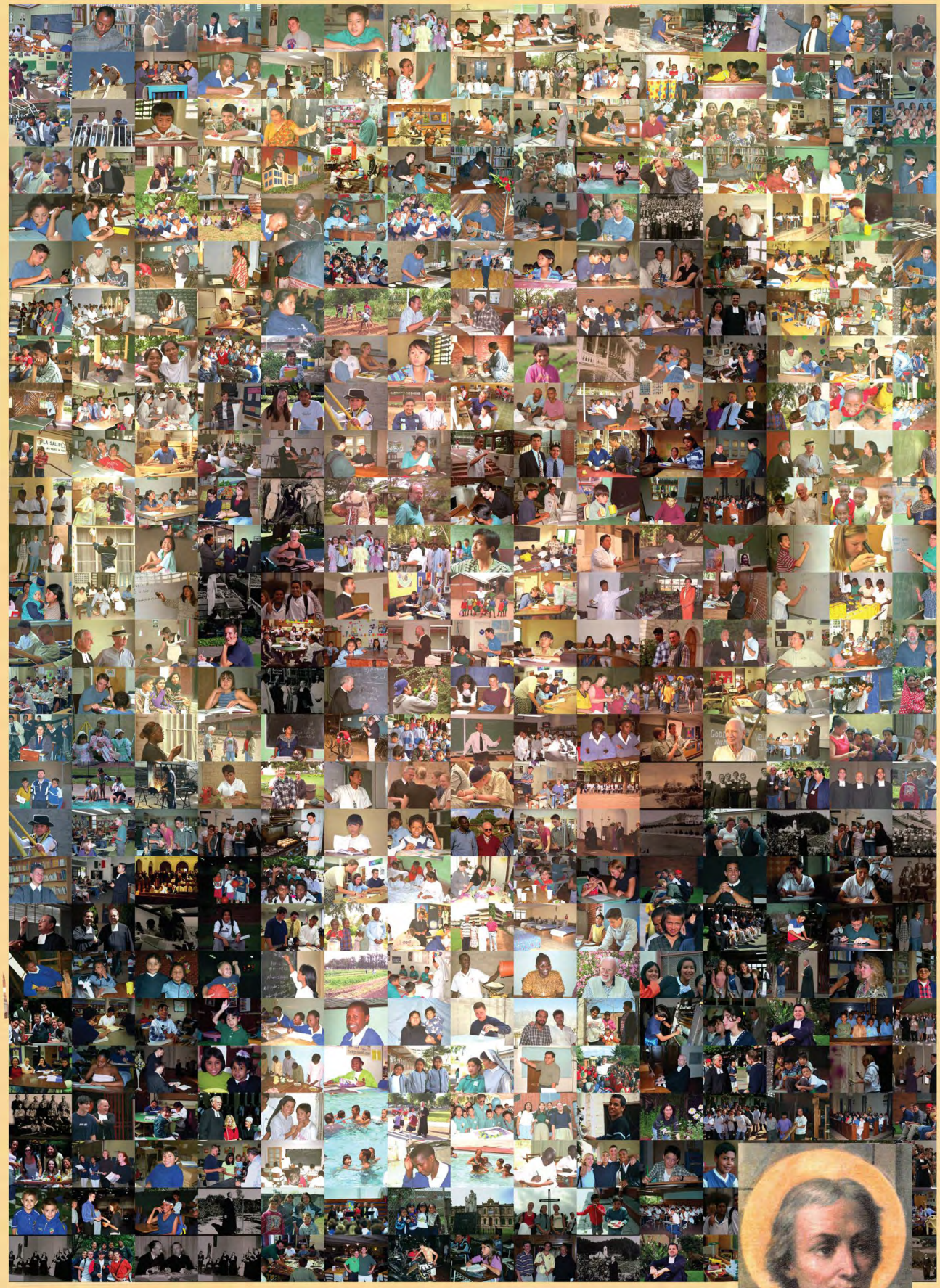
JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE

FOUNDER, EDUCATOR, SAINT

The Founding Story of Lasallian Education

PUBLISHED BY THE BROTHERS OF THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS





This detail from a painting by Gagliardi (1901) has become a favorite portrait of John Baptist de La Salle. The mosaic version of it on this page was created by overlaying hundreds of photographs of Lasallian education in action throughout the world. The photomosaic image was created by Brother George Van Grieken, FSC.

Introduction

A Catholic, Lasallian school has characteristics by which it can be recognized. It offers an education of the highest quality that answers to the genuine needs of its students; it displays a firm faith in God and proclaims the gospel of Jesus Christ; it exhibits respect for all persons and an inclusive spirit of community; it demonstrates solidarity with the poor and a concern for justice; it inculcates habits of service to others and a zealous commitment to the common good. But there is one more characteristic, a truly distinctive one, that every Lasallian school displays: the school community is formed in reference to the story of John Baptist de La Salle.

The fascinating story of John Baptist de La Salle — the story of a talented, devout, and unassuming Frenchman who answered an unexpected call from God to address the educational needs of the poor — is one that all Lasallians should know. For in that story we can see the origin of all the principles and practices which in their integration make up Lasallian educational communities today. The more deeply we know and understand this founding story, the more clearly we see that, though it took place three centuries ago, that story is not old but is ever new. De La Salle and the early Brothers and their supporters created an apostolate that continues to engage people all over the world who see the profundity and urgency of the mission that Lasallians associate to carry out — the mission of providing a human and Christian to the young, especially the poor.

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This booklet is based on a special issue of the Signs of Faith magazine, Fall 2000, produced by the District of San Francisco, Fall 2000 (Guest editor, Br. George Van Grieken, FSC; Articles written by J. A. Gray; Graphic design and layout by Cathy Locke of Studio North - www.studionorthnet.com).

J.A. Gray added Pgs. 40-41 and new cover pages for this booklet, intended for a wider Lasallian audience.

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Cover art: This painting of John Baptist de La Salle by Audfray is a more youthful version of the official portrait of De La Salle by Pierre Leger.

John Baptist de La Salle:
His Life and Times

It is April 1679. A young priest waits on the doorstep of a convent in Reims, France. He has come to call upon the Sisters of the Child Jesus, a new order whose work is the care and education of poor girls. The young priest has helped them in becoming established, and now he serves as their chaplain and confessor. His name is John Baptist de La Salle. The eldest son of a wealthy professional family in the city of Reims, not quite 28 years old, he has been ordained for two years and is about to receive his doctorate in theology. He is a canon of the prestigious Cathedral Chapter at Reims, which is a traditional breeding ground of bishops and cardinals. A man so gifted and so positioned might well become an important member of the Church hierarchy or a distinguished professor. This young canon, thoughtful, cultivated, and kind-hearted, will certainly become notable in church circles and a pious influence at the comfortable and powerful level of society that is his natural milieu in 17th-Century France.



Fast forward to April of 1719. That young priest, now old, racked by asthma and chronic rheumatism, is at the end of his earthly journey. In the early morning hours of Good Friday, he lies in his bed, attended by the men whom he calls "Brothers." His wealth was long ago given away, and the privileges that were his by birth have long since been surrendered. His church connections are mixed at best; some church leaders admire him, but many powerful pastors and bishops have treated him and his work with contempt or hostility. His journey has been down paths he could not have imagined forty years earlier. And what are the final results of his life's work? A small community of some hundred men that calls itself the Brothers of the Christian Schools but is not yet recognized officially by either church or state,

and a set of mostly parish-based schools for poor boys, schools fully appreciated only by those who attend them. Early on that Friday morning, as De La Salle begins to breathe his last, Brother Barthélemy, his successor as Superior of the Brothers, asks him if he accepts his sufferings. De La Salle responds: "Oui, j'adore en toutes choses la conduite de Dieu à mon égard." ("Yes, I adore God guiding me in all the events of my life.")

John Baptist de La Salle meets Adrian Nyel in April 1679 — a chance encounter that would prove to be providential.



Painting from Gerlier's engraving of Gaveau's 1886 Life of the Founder – from Rousset's Iconographie.

Timeline of Events

1650



1651: John Baptist de La Salle is born at Reims.

1651: King Louis XIV attains his majority (age 14). Riccioli (in Italy) publishes a map of the surface of the moon.

1660

1662: Louis XIV begins building the palace at Versailles.



1666: Following the resignation of Pierre Dozet, John Baptist de La Salle is named Canon of the Cathedral Church of Reims.

1669: John Baptist de La Salle earns his Master's degree, with highest honors.

1670



1670: John Baptist de La Salle enters the seminary of Saint Sulpice in Paris.

1670: Pascal's Pensées is published.

1672: John Baptist de La Salle's parents die. He leaves the seminary and returns to Reims to be head of the family and guardian of his six brothers and sisters.

1673: French explorers Marquette and Joliet reach the headwaters of the Mississippi River.

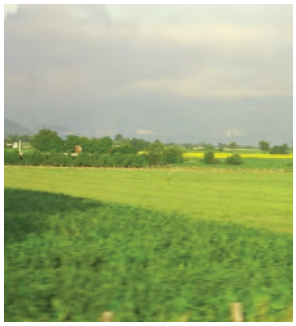
1678: John Baptist de La Salle receives a licentiate in theology and is ordained a priest, having continued his studies in Reims.

1679: A chance encounter at the convent of the Sisters of the Child Jesus on the Rue du Barbâtre with schoolmaster Adrian Nyel, who had just arrived from Rouen, involves John Baptist de La Salle in starting free schools for poor boys in Reims. John Baptist de La Salle invites into his home on the Rue Sainte Marguerite both Adrien Nyel and his fourteen-year-old apprentice.

And so John Baptist de La Salle dies. He has not become a distinguished professor or an important churchman. He has only the regular tasks of the seminarians was to teach catechism to the poor. When De La Salle was compelled to return to Reims eighteen months tics that would emerge during the course of his involvement in the world of education.







Left: The courtyard of the Hôtel de la Cloche, the birthplace of John Baptist de La Salle, where he lived until the age of fourteen. Middle: The front of the Hôtel de la Cloche. Right: The area around Reims is known for its rich farmland. De La Salle's mother's family, the Moëts, kept extensive vineyards in the countryside.

become the founder of a religious order, an educational pioneer, and a saint. It is apparent that the life he lived was the life God led him to live. Yet at one point, De La Salle wrote that if he had known what was in store for him, he would not have even begun the task.

The foundation was established in his early life. While it might have been expected that he would follow in his father's footsteps as a magistrate of the presidial court, he chose to pursue the priesthood and underwent an official ceremony at the age of ten to confirm his intention. At sixteen, he received the distinguished position of canon, a title that brought with it both church responsibilities and church benefits. At age 19, De La Salle studied at the Sorbonne while residing at the Seminary of Saint Sulpice in Paris, founded only twenty-five years earlier in a spirit of clerical renewal mandated by the Council of Trent a century earlier. Saint Sulpice was notable for a rigorous life style and was intended to produce priests capable of self-sacrifice and self-discipline. Among later upon the death of his parents, his vocation began to develop in ways he would never have anticipated. Named in his father's will as executor of the estate and guardian of the younger children, John Baptist, returning to Reims, dutifully and capably assumed the role of head of the household. The 21-year-old seminarian – still technically a minor, since the age of majority was 25 – had four brothers and two sisters to take care of. Surviving documents show that his duties as guardian of his siblings and administrator of his family estate and properties were handled with meticulous care and administrative acumen. In the meantime, he pursued his studies and his path to the priesthood: he was ordained a subdeacon in 1672, a deacon in 1676, and he became a priest on April 9, 1678. As for his studies, he received a licentiate in theology in 1676 and a doctorate in 1680. Through all of this, the roots of his religious calling had become firmly planted, and the care he showed in fulfilling his family responsibilities foreshadowed the characteris-

The beginning of his involvement in the world of education – at least the visible beginning – came at that convent door of the Sisters of the Child Jesus in April of 1679 where he happened to encounter another man coming to call on the Sisters. Adrian Nyel was a layman who had worked in Rouen for many years providing schooling for the poor, and a wealthy widow had asked Nyel to see about founding a charity school for boys in Reims. Nyel's first call in Reims was at the convent of the teaching Sisters. Following their meeting, De La Salle invited Nyel to stay at his home while he consulted with others in Reims on how to start the proposed school for poor boys.

De La Salle's help was effective, and a school was soon opened. Shortly thereafter, another wealthy woman in Reims told Nyel that she also would endow a school but only if De La Salle would help.

De La Salle agreed and gradually began to help support the teachers, even renting them a house to live in. Now he found himself becoming drawn into a very differ-

ent world, the world of the poor – a world of disadvantaged students, uncultured teachers, and parents chronically oppressed by poverty. De La Salle could not deny the needs he saw so immediately before him.

Within a short time, Nyel was off to other towns, starting yet more schools. De La Salle knew that the teachers in Reims were struggling, lacking leadership, purpose, and training, and he found himself taking increasingly deliberate steps to help this small group of men with their work. First, in 1680, he invited them to take their meals in his home, as much to teach them table manners as to inspire and instruct them in their work. This crossing of social boundaries was one that his relatives found difficult to bear. In 1681, De La Salle realized that he would have to take a further step – he brought the teachers into his own home to live with him. De La Salle's relatives were deeply disturbed, his social class was scandalized, and it was thought he was carrying the Gospel a bit too far. But De La Salle could not shake the conviction that he was doing something in accordance with God's will for him. When, a year later, his family home was lost at auction because of a family lawsuit, De La Salle rented a house into which he and the handful of teachers moved, a house that would come to be called "the cradle of the Institute." One biographer has called the walk across town to this undistinguished home in the poorer part of town De La Salle's "personal Exodus." It was here that those who had joined this new enterprise with De La Salle first began to call themselves "Brothers."

Community life became formalized, teaching and procedures at the three schools became more regular, some men left and new candidates came. Within a year, in 1683, the Brothers became concerned about their stability and their security as part of this untested enterprise. De La Salle replied with an inspiring talk about trusting God. Their rather rough response was that it was easy for him to talk, being a wealthy man by birth and a canon with a large annual income, whereas they were poor, with no skills and no prospects. If the schools should fail, he would be no worse off, whereas they would

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"It never would have occurred to me that I would ever take charge of the schools and the teachers. Not that such a plan had never been proposed to me. But it never became part of my thinking and I certainly never had any intention of putting it into practice."
– John Baptist de La Salle

1680



1680: John Baptist de La Salle receives his doctorate in theology. Pictured here is Collége des Bons Enfants where he went to school. Today, it is a government school.

1680: John Baptist de La Salle takes the struggling group of school teachers into his home for meals, meetings, and prayer. This is considered the founding of the Institute.

1683: De La Salle joins the Brothers in their poverty and dependence on God by resigning his office as canon and using his personal fortune to feed the poor during a famine.



1684: Louis XIV, after the death of Maria Teresa, marries Madame de Maintenon.



1686: First General Assembly of the Brothers, in Reims. A distinctive habit and the name "Brothers of the Christian Schools" are adopted, and a vow of obedience taken. Ecclesiastical authorities reject the appointment of Brother L'Heureux. De La Salle resumes the office of superior.



1687: Archbishop Fénelon publishes his Treatise on the Education of Girls.

1688: In response to a request by Claude de La Barmondiere, the parish priest of Saint Sulpice, the Brothers assume direction of a school in Paris, their first enterprise outside of Reims. The Brothers are feared as competition by the for-profit educational establishment: lawsuits, conflicts, and harassment will continue for two decades.

During the famine of 1683-1684, De La Salle distributes his wealth by providing food to the poor.



Painting by Giovanni Gagliardi (1901), at the Generalate, Rome.

The France of De La Salle

France at the end of the 17th century was a society divided and stratified in ways that ours is not, but with some characteristics that may be familiar. There was heavy taxation, the poor stayed poor, the rich got richer, and as the Middle Ages truly ended and the age of commerce and science began, the bourgeoisie were beginning to exercise more influence, partly because social influence was beginning to become based more and more on money rather than sheer status. Birth was still important, but it was no longer the only measure of worth. Merchants, tradesmen, city council members,professionals of all sorts jostled for influence and standing, working their way ever higher into the upper classes of the bourgeoisie. France had much wealth, yet there was frequent economic crisis, partly from incessant, expensive wars, and there was periodic famine and consequent epidemics of disease, for the economy was based on agriculture and the country's well-being was thus susceptible to drought or blight. Two-thirds of the population of 19 to 20 million lived in the countryside, many of them poor and unprovided with education. The Church was wealthy and intricately intertwined with the state. The parish was a civil administrative division as well as an ecclesiastical one, where registers of births, deaths, and marriages were kept. The parish was used as a territorial framework for the registering of population and the levying of taxes; and parishes were responsible for providing education of the poor. But the results were highly inconsistent. There was wealth, power, and influence available in city, state, and church for those who were positioned to grasp for it. But the poor and destitute, of whom there were many, were in a position of insecurity, dependence, and inferiority, dependent upon charity.

1690



1690: There are defections and deaths among the Brothers, opposition from authorities, and a near-fatal illness for De La Salle. The Brothers open the establishment at Vaugirard, outside Paris, including the first formal novitiate.

1691: De La Salle and two Brothers swear a "heroic vow" to establish the Institute even if all others leave and they are reduced to begging for their bread.

1694: At the first General Chapter, De La Salle and twelve Brothers make perpetual vows, and the first Rule is adopted.



1699: The Brothers open a school in Chartres; schools are opened in 18 more cities in France over the next two decades.

1700

1702: The Drolin Brothers, Gabriel and Gerard, leave to work in Rome.



1705: The Brothers open the establishment at Saint Yon, near Rouen, including a novitiate, boarding school, and a home for delinquent boys. Formal permission is given to print all the works prepared by De La Salle for use in the schools.

1711: The Clément family secures a court judgment against De La Salle in Paris that costs the Institute money and property and publicly impugns De La Salle's integrity.



1712: De La Salle withdraws from Paris to visit the Institute's establishments in the south of France and to make an extended retreat.

1714: Summoned back to Paris by his Brothers, De La Salle obediently does as requested, preparing the next General Assembly and helping to revise the Rule.

be back on the streets. De La Salle found merit in their observation.

He considered donating his personal wealth to endow the community. But after praying deeply and consulting widely, he decided that the Holy Spirit was leading him along a different path. So, in 1683, he resigned his position of canon at the cathedral and in the winter of 1683-1684 he gave away all that he had to feed the poor during a particularly severe famine in Reims. Thus he joined his Brothers in true poverty, and broke down the barrier that separated him from them. Now, they would all be fully dependent on God alone.

For a person of De La Salle's background and position as a priest to accept these laymen as his equals and colleagues, as his brothers, was quite unheard of. Yet, early on, De La Salle realized that the community had to govern itself from within, rather than from the outside, whether by a bishop, a parish priest, or even himself. At the Brothers' General Assembly in 1686, a distinctive habit was approved, a vow of obedience was taken, and the name "Brothers of the Christian Schools" was officially adopted. A year later, De La Salle insisted that the Brothers elect one of their own as Superior. The Brothers reluctantly agreed, electing 24-year-old Brother Henri L'Heureux. De La Salle was the first to show strict obedience to him. Once it became known outside of the house that a priest had become subject to a layman, however, there was considerable upset in church circles. The idea of a cleric obeying a layman as his superior was scandalous, and the archbishop quickly ordered De La Salle to resume the headship of the group. He did so. Nonetheless, he consistently found ways to allow the Brothers to take their governance into their own hands, and he resisted efforts of various pastors and bishops to place the little community under their control. For instance, when after a few years the Brothers proved to be quite successful in Reims, the archbishop offered them his support in establishing new schools and maintaining the existing ones – if they would remain in his diocese alone.

This was a decisive moment for the identity of the fledgling community. Would they remain a diocesan group, confined to one area of France, or was their scope larger? De La Salle was already aware that the need for schools for the poor was acute in Paris, and he had promised a pastor there that the Brothers would come to staff a charity school. Hence, he declined the offer from the Archbishop of Reims, and in 1688 he and two Brothers traveled to Paris, where in short order they revitalized the school for the poor in the parish of Saint Sulpice. This move was important because it established the group's autonomy and freedom from direct diocesan control, and it allowed the Brothers in Reims to begin to develop without leaning on De La Salle's constant presence.

As the work began in Paris, first at one school and then at several more, a new challenge appeared. Schools for the poor such as the Brothers ran were meant to be restricted to the certified poor. Anyone who could pay a fee for education was supposed to go to the Little Schools or to the Writing Masters and their for-profit establishments. However, the Brothers did not distinguish in their admissions between poor and non-poor. All were welcome to their free schools, and many wanted to come, including those whose families were not on the parish's Poor Register. The fee-taking teachers filed suits for infringement on their business and violation of the established regulations. This hostility, in suits, harassment, and even violence, continued in Paris for the next fifteen years.

Back in Reims, meanwhile, other difficulties appeared. The sixteen Brothers were now eight because of defections. Opponents continued to oppose the work or tried to control it according to their own vision. Some devoted Brothers fell ill and died through overwork, and De La Salle himself underwent a long sickness that brought him near death. The prognosis for the new community and its work seemed suddenly bleak. Finally, the sudden death of Brother Henri, whom he had been training for the priesthood and who he had hoped would succeed him as Superior, hurt De La Salle deeply. Yet, with faith in God's Providence, he took Brother Henri's death as a sign that the Institute was meant to remain non-clerical in nature.

De La Salle purchased property outside of Paris, at Vaugirard, and brought all the Brothers there for an extended retreat wherein he rekindled their fervor. In 1691, he also made a radical commitment to the work; he and two of his most trusted Brothers made a secret "heroic vow," committing themselves to the establishment of this enterprise "…even should we remain the only three members of the said Society, and should be obliged to beg for alms and live on bread only."

In 1694, the first assembly to be known as a General Chapter was held, at which perpetual vows of obedience and association for the educational service of the poor were taken for the first time by De La Salle and twelve Brothers. Again De La Salle, despite his wish for a Brother to have the office, was elected Superior, twice, as he made them vote again. He finally accepted this as God's will, but insisted that the Brothers declare, in writing, that their choice of their priest-founder as Superior was not to be a precedent for the future and that "henceforth and for all time no priest or person in sacred orders is to be accepted into our Society or elected as Superior, and that we shall never admit as Superior anyone who has not associated himself with us by the same vow as we have pronounced."

Now De La Salle and the Brothers began to fortify their Society, strengthening and expanding the already flourishing schools and communities, and providing for the young candidates asking to join. De La Salle spent time writing various texts, both for the schools and for the Brothers, including everything from a student reading text on politeness and decorum to a detailed method for the Brothers' interior prayer.

Between 1694 and 1709, many new schools opened, several others closed, and legal battles raged on. In Paris, some Brothers even turned against him, and as lawsuits were decided against him, he began to wonder if the welfare of the community and the prosperity of the work required his personal withdrawal from the scene. A new series of setbacks, culminating in a costly and embarrassing legal judgment – the Clément affair – convinced him that it was so.

"If my work does not come from God,
I would consent to its ruin.
I would join our enemies in
destroying it if I thought that
it did not have God for its author,
or that He did not will its progress."
– John Baptist de La Salle

In 1709 a wealthy young man named Clément, expressing eagerness to help the mission, pledged financial assistance to establish a teacher training school near Paris that the Brothers would run. The young man (not yet legally an adult, below the age of 25) could not immediately make good on the pledge, and De La Salle fronted the money to open the establishment, in expectation of repayment from Clément. The young man, however, reneged on the deal, and his influential father sued to invalidate the arrangement. When the case was decided in 1712, the decision went against De La Salle, who was left without the training school or the property, was ordered to reimburse any funds received, and had his honor impugned by a judicial condemnation on the very

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1715: Louis XIV dies and is succeeded by his five-year-old great-grandson, Louis XV.



1717: The second General Chapter elects Brother Barthélemy the first Superior General.

1718: De La Salle lives at Saint Yon, writing and ministering, but becomes increasingly ill.

1719: Madame de Maintenon, the widow of Louis XIV, dies, aged eighty.



1719: On Good Friday morning, De La Salle dies at Saint Yon, aged nearly 68. The word is passed through the streets of Rouen: "The Saint is dead."

1724: Royal letters patent are issued (State recognition of the Institute as a legal entity).

1725: Papal bull of approbation is issued (Church recognition of the Institute as a religious congregation).

1800

1888: On February 19th, De La Salle is beatified.

1900

1900: On May 24th, De La Salle is canonized.

1950: On May 15th, Saint John Baptist de La Salle is proclaimed Patron of All Teachers of Youth.

A visit to Saint-Yon by the Archbishop of Rouen, son of Louis XIV's minister Colbert, accompanied by Pontcarré, president of the Normandy parliament. The Brothers had been at Saint Yon on the outskirts of Rouen since 1705, and it housed the novitiate, a boarding school and an establishment for delinquents. De La Salle spent the last years of his life there.



Painting by Giovanni Gagliardi (1905)

De La Salle: A Son of the Upper Class

John Baptist de La Salle was born into a comfortable and established level of the stratified French society, the upper bourgeoisie – his ancestors wealthy from the cloth trade, his father a lawyer and magistrate, his mother of noble family, people who lived a privileged life in a spacious mansion with servants, fine food and clothing, a well-stocked library, abundant educational opportunities, and cultivated entertainment. His father Louis was apparently a wise, conscientious, cultured man of the world, and both parents are said to have been devout in their practice of Catholicism. Young John Baptist seems to have been conscious from an early age of a call to the priesthood, and his father's cousin, Vicar General of Reims and Chancellor of the University, arranged for the boy to receive the "tonsure" at age ten, signifying his interest in the priesthood. This made the boy eligible for ecclesiastical benefices (without committing him irrevocably to the obligations associated with Holy Orders) even while he continued to attend preparatory school. De La Salle's later resourcefulness as an educational innovator is not owing to any experience of innovation or reform in his own schooling. The curriculum and method were staid and traditional; he studied Latin, Greek, and classical philosophy, reading only ancient authors, and science by way of Aristotle. De La Salle did well in his studies and took part in what are now called co-curricular activities: a role in a school play, a prize in elocution, and an honorable mention in declamation. The same priestly cousin who had invited De La Salle to receive the tonsure paid him a distinct honor when the boy was not quite 16 by resigning his office as a canon of the cathedral in favor of the boy. This was a distinguished ecclesiastical position (among the alumni of the cathedral chapter of Reims were popes, cardinals, and bishops). Duties of a canon were principally public prayer (daily liturgy of the hours and solemn liturgies on great feasts) and taking part in advisory sessions with the archbishop. The rewards were great: a house, a considerable yearly stipend, and concomitant dignity and prestige.

The Family of John Baptist de La Salle

De La Salle's Parents

Louis de La Salle (1625 – 1672)

The father of De La Salle was a distinguished magistrate of the presidial court of Reims. He married at the age of twenty-five and was a faithful husband and a devout father. Louis was highly respected in his profession and was a true humanist with an extensive library. He had a life-long interest in music and the arts, something which was not as evident in his eldest son. Louis provided well for all of his children, and in the case of De La Salle paid the significant expense of an education at the Seminary of Saint Sulpice in Paris.

Nicole Moët de Brouillet (1633 – 1671)

Of the landed gentry by birth, De La Salle's mother lost her claim to nobility by marrying Louis de La Salle, a bourgeois. Married at the age of seventeen, she bore eleven children during twenty years of married life and died eight months prior to her husband. Nicole Moët de Brouillet was known for her deep and genuine piety, and one biographer of De La Salle attributes to her the deep sense of the presence of God that was to become such an important part of De la Salle's spiritual vision.

De La Salle's Brothers and Sisters

Of eleven children in the family, four died in infancy – Remy (b.1652), Jean-Louis (b.1663), Simon (1667-1669), and Anne-Marie (b.1656) – and seven survived into adulthood. This was something that was not uncommon during the 17th century.

Marie (1654 – 1711)

De La Salle's eldest sister, she is said to have had a beautiful voice and played a popular lute-like stringed instrument called a theorbo. After her parents' deaths, Marie went to live with her maternal grandmother, helping to care for her youngest brother, Jean-Remy, who was still an infant. In 1679 she married Jean Maillefer. Of the ten children of her marriage, five survived until adulthood, including one who became a Benedictine and eventually wrote about the life of his uncle, John Baptist de La Salle.

Rose-Marie (1656 – 1682)

Affectionately called Rosette by De La Salle, Rose-Marie joined the Canonesses of Saint Augustine at the age of sixteen, just before the death of her parents. During the time before her own sudden death in 1682 at the age of twenty-five – the victim of poisoning from a badly-prepared medicine – De La Salle had taken affectionate care of her. He visited her at the convent, located near the Brothers' house on Rue Neuve, and his records show him buying her books, articles of clothing, and small personal gifts such as sugar, oranges, and an iron bedwarmer. He also provided her with a small annual income as pocket money.

shameful charge of suborning a minor to extort money from him. De La Salle, habitually cautious and prudent, had paid a high price for his zeal. When he foresaw that the judgment would go against him, he handed all documents over to his lawyer and left Paris for an extended visit to the Brothers' establishments in the south of France – outside the Paris jurisdiction.







At Parménie in the south of France, De La Salle made several extended retreats, consulting with Louise Hours (1646-1727), popularly known as Sister Louise, who had established the retreat center. It was here that he came to realize that his work with the Brothers had not yet been completed. Pictured here on the left and middle is Parménie today. On the far right is a painting of Sister Louise.

On this journey, which lasted more than two years, he grappled with the dispiriting evidence that his presence and activities in Paris had seemed to harm the Brothers' mission. Not all of the communities he visited in the south of France welcomed him, as he patiently tried to repair communities that were weak or in disarray. In Marseilles, he opened a novitiate to form Brothers for the schools of the area – only to see it close when the local views regarding the Brothers and the Church came into conflict with his own. In addition to helping the Brothers where he could, even doing classroom teaching at the school in Grenoble, he spent much personal time in retreat at monasteries. His physical health was poor (his rheumatism was chronic), his long labors had worn him out, the difficulties in Paris continued to be a personal challenge, and the future was not clear. He pondered the continued usefulness of his presence within the Institute that he had worked so hard to establish. If it was now God's will to take him along a new route, he would follow. But where was God's will? He spent several weeks at a hermitage near Grenoble, called Parménie, conversing with a devout and pious visionary, Sister Louise.

While in Parménie in 1714, he received a letter from the assembled Brothers of the Paris area, where external authorities were again trying to tamper with the Brothers' self-governance and to rewrite their Rule. The Brothers wrote to De La Salle: "We, the principal Brothers of the Christian Schools…command you in the name of the body of this Society to which you have vowed obedience …to resume forthwith the general conduct of affairs." It seems that the independence of the Brothers that he had hoped for had different results than he had expected. The society was now capable of taking its destiny into its own hands, but the Brothers would do so by commanding him to return. After consulting with Sister Louise, who helped him to see that God's will for him still lay with his Brothers, he returned to Paris. As the Brothers in Paris opened the door to him, he said, "Here I am. What do you want me to do?"

Understanding better than his Brothers that though he might be needed, he was not indispensable, he did not quite do everything they wished, for he allowed Brother Barthélemy, the novice master who had filled the void as nominal Superior after De La Salle had left, to remain in charge. De La Salle's presence and insights, however, did help eventually to resolve most of the difficulties that had been besetting them. After a year in Paris, De La Salle moved to Rouen with Brother Barthélemy and the novices. There at Saint Yon – which now housed the novitiate, a boarding school, and a juvenile center – he began to make arrangements for another General Chapter. The Brothers now constituted 23 houses and 34 educational establishments throughout France, with 100 Brothers and some 18 novices (and one stalwart Brother, Gabriel Drolin, on solitary assignment in Rome). After Brother Barthélemy had visited all the communities to gain their agreement to the assembly, the "principal Brothers" assembled in May of 1717. At the request of the assembly, the Founder drew up a definitive revision of the Rule, based on their discussions. The assembly formally elected Brother Barthélemy as the new Superior, and De La Salle was assiduous in obeying the authority of the new Superior. To one correspondent who could not break the habit of consulting him, he wrote,

"I beg you for the love of God, my dear Brother, that for the future you think no more about consulting me on anything. You have your superiors whom you must consult on matters spiritual and temporal. For myself there is nothing now but to prepare myself for death which must soon make my final separation from all creatures."

De La Salle stayed at a seminary in Paris for several months to attend to some legal repercussions from the Clément affair – a process that providentially provided enough funds to purchase the property that the Brothers had been renting at Saint Yon. After returning to Saint Yon, he was ill for many months but rallied to complete his work, and then sank into terminal decline. Even on his deathbed his troubles did not cease. He learned that the Archbishop of Rouen had withdrawn his authorization to celebrate the sacraments for the community because of a dispute with the local pastor. Yet his long practice of self-effacement and submission to God's will had made him tranquil in all situations. His Gospel journey had taken him long past the point at which any personal injustice could wound him. "Oui, j'adore en toutes choses la conduite de Dieu à mon égard."

At four o'clock in the morning on Good Friday, De La Salle made an effort to rise from his bed as if to greet someone, then joined his hands, raised his eyes to heaven, and died. He was buried on Holy Saturday in a side chapel of the local parish church, Saint Sever. Since it was Holy Week, the more solemn funeral rituals were delayed until the following week. Throughout Rouen, and soon throughout the Society, word spread that "the Saint is dead." But the providential extension of his life, work, and influence was just beginning. ©

A thorough but accessible biography of De La Salle is "The Work Is Yours" by Luke Salm, FSC; a more exhaustive one is "De La Salle: A City Saint and the Liberation of the Poor Through Education" by Alfred Calcutt, FSC. For a compact introduction to De La Salle's life and times and achievement, and an analysis of the meaning of Lasallian education today, see "Touching the Hearts of Students: Characteristics of Lasallian Schools" by George Van Grieken, FSC.

"Since I no longer felt myself
drawn to the vocation of a canon,
it seemed to me that the office
of canon had left me long before I
left the office of canon.
Although I entered it
freely through an open door,
it seems to me that today God is opening the door again so that
I can leave it. " – John Baptist de La Salle

Continuation of De La Salle's Brothers and Sisters

Jacques-Joseph (1659 – 1723)

The next oldest boy of the family, he remained with De La Salle at the family home in Reims for five years after the death of their parents when he was not yet thirteen. In 1677, at the age of eighteen, he entered the Canons Regular of Saint Augustine in Paris. In due time, Jacques-Joseph acquired degrees in philosophy, civil law, and canon law, including a doctorate in theology. He was a professor of philosophy and theology and became prior of the monastery and pastor of the church of Saint Martin in Chauny, a post he held until his death in 1723.

Jean-Louis (1664 – 1724)

The only sibling to remain with De La Salle after he and the first Brothers moved out of the family home and into the simple house on Rue Neuve, Louis came to have the distinguished church career De La Salle could have had. A student at the Sorbonne and the Seminary of Saint Sulpice, he became a Doctor of Theology and later a Canon of the Cathedral of Reims. Louis supported his older brother's work, heading a civil association that was formed to provide financial and legal support for the work of the Brothers in Reims.

Pierre (1666 – 1741)

Living with De La Salle from the age of six, when their parents died, until the age of sixteen, Pierre's education was supervised by his oldest brother. After spending a short time with his oldest sister when De La Salle and the Brothers moved out of the family home, Pierre studied law and became a successful lawyer in Paris, eventually becoming magistrate of the Presidial Court of Reims, as his father had been. Married in 1696 at the age of twenty-nine to Francoise-Henriette Bachelier, a distant cousin, the couple had eight children. After the deaths of both De La Salle and Jean-Louis, Pierre reorganized the civil association that continued to support the Brothers' work in Reims.

Jean-Remy (1670 – 1732)

Just over a year old when his parents died, Jean-Remy's early years were spent with his oldest sister Marie at his maternal grandmother's home. After Marie's wedding in 1679, he returned to the family home at the age of nine to be with De La Salle, Jean-Louis, and Pierre. Two years later, when the family home was sold and De La Salle and the Brothers moved to Rue Neuve, Jean-Remy was sent off to boarding school. He had successive careers as an army officer, a judicial counselor, and a procurator of the court. Jean-Remy married in 1711 at the age of forty-one, but gradually began to exhibit strange patterns of behavior. By 1715 he had lost almost all control over his affairs and two years later was declared mentally incompetent. After Jean-Remy's confinement to a mental institution, where he died in 1732, his two oldest brothers were generous in their financial support of his wife and children.

John Baptist de La Salle:
Educator and Visionary

On May 15, 1950, the Catholic Church declared that John Baptist de La Salle is "principal patron before God of all teachers of children and adolescents." The Church holds him up "in order that teachers and student-teachers might have a model whose example and virtues they could imitate…." What are those virtues? What is that example? Why is De La Salle not only a model for Christian educators but also recognized by secular historians of education for his innovative and effective contributions?

Education in De La Salle's World

To appreciate John Baptist De La Salle properly we need to know a little about the educational environment in which he worked. We might assume that a holy man who provides education for the poor would be welcome in any society. But in a class-conscious and highly regulated society like that of 17th-century France such a man may step on many toes. De La Salle, as he went about creating a type of schooling for boys from the neglected poor and working class that had not been seen before, crossed social boundaries, upset established educational groups, and affronted certain conventions, both within the church and within society. Yet De La Salle was neither a loud and vocal revolutionary nor a reformer with an abstract program of his own devising. He was an unassuming, quiet French upper-class gentleman, a cultivated priest and doctor of theology, who found God moving him to care in concrete ways for the education and salvation of the underclass, the working poor — the ones whom Jesus had called "the least of these." Gradually he became, step by step, and somewhat to his own surprise, an educational pioneer.

Educational opportunities in 17th-century France were not lacking – for the right people. Those who could pay and who were socially connected could find many educational opportunities, beginning with tutors and moving on to apprenticeships or further schooling opportunities. And those who provided education carefully guarded their domains, often amid lawsuits that decided who could teach what to whom. Though the age of science and commerce was beginning to dawn, higher education still had a medieval shape and flavor to it: university instruction was wholly in Latin, and the curricula of the lower schools were largely literary and Latin-based — hardly appropriate for the needs of artisans and laborers and the working poor. The bureaucracies



Cesare Mariani's painting of the Founder teaching class. On the occasion of the beatification of John Baptist de La Salle in 1888, the Institute presented the painting to Pope Leo XIII. The painting has been on display from time to time in the Vatican Museum and in the Generalate in Rome.

overseeing all this were intricate and formidable, with crown, church, city, and guilds overlapping and sometimes competing with one another with regard to their rights, regulations, and requirements.

The education of those who could afford to pay nothing was to be covered by individual parishes – with some private schoolmasters (in theory) taking on poor students out of a sense of social responsibility. Each parish had its Poor Register, and parishes were urged to maintain "charity schools" for the children of the families on that register. But the very name "charity school" shows that, for the poor, education was a matter of charity, not a matter of course, and certainly not a right. The necessity of being registered also meant that the poor were officially segregated in their schooling. The chronic poverty of this clientele was another major handicap. The minor fees required for writing materials and the like were beyond the reach of many families, and if a child could work and bring the family any income at all, school attendance was likely to take second place, with a typical pupil being able to squeeze in a couple of years of attendance. Finally, by its nature, a parish charity school was only as effective as the zeal of the parish and the skill of the pastor could make it, as pastors came and went and charity waxed and waned.

But the most intractable chronic problem was the lack of competent and stable teachers for these parish schools. A person who could read and write and do arithmetic well enough to be an effective teacher was also qualified to "do something better." In general, the job of schoolmaster was seen neither as a profession nor as a vocation; it was neither well-paid nor well-respected. In the parishes, the schoolmaster was also likely to be either an assistant to the pastor who took care of the practical details of parish life and had a minimal amount of schooling, or a tradesman who could read and write, but who put the children to work making salable items to reduce the cost to the parish of the school and to increase his own income. There might be a little catechism, a little reading or counting, and a little manual labor, with discipline scant and truancy high.

By rights, none of this was any concern of the young priest De La Salle. He was not a teacher, not a school administrator, and not a parish priest. He held a prestigious office as a canon of the cathedral at Reims, and was administrator of his family's wealth and guardian of his orphaned siblings.

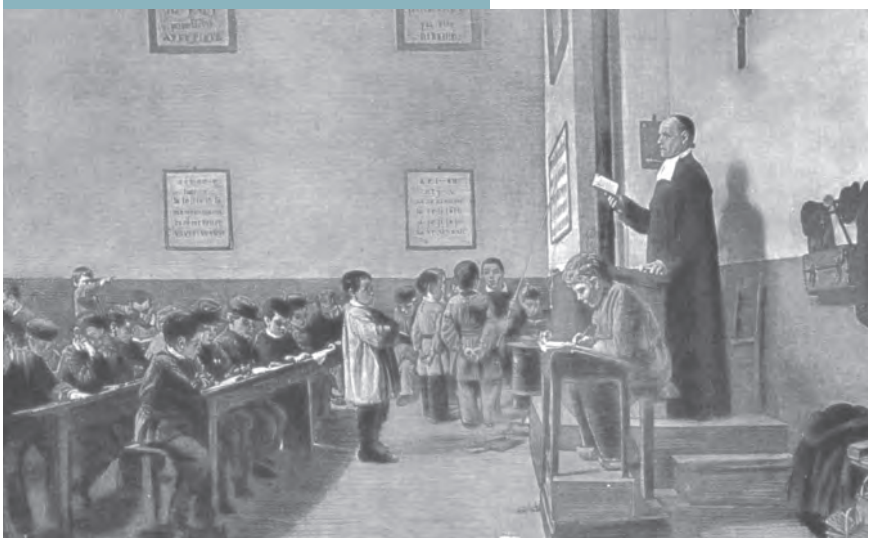
How did he get involved in education of the poor? In response to a request in a friend's will, he helped a new congregation of teaching Sisters to establish itself in Reims. Then, out of kindness, he gave advice and help to a man from out of town who had come to Reims to establish a charity school for boys. Soon a second school for boys was started, and De La Salle, finding that the provided funds were not sufficient to maintain the teachers, contributed some of his own money to their upkeep. When the teachers grew too numerous for the parish house where they lived, De La Salle rented a house for them near his own.

From his occasional visits and increasing involvement with them, he could see that this handful of hastily gathered men was far from satisfactory as a group of schoolmasters. In addition to defects in competence and training, they lacked cohesion as a group and insight into the nature of their



The picture on the left shows a typical school setting of the 17th century, with one student reciting his lesson while another awaits his turn and the rest of the students amuse themselves. On the right is a depiction of an organized classroom in the 19th century that follows the guidelines of De La Salle's Conduct of Schools.

When something unexpected occurred in De La Salle's life, his response often began with the exclamation "God be blessed!" Whether he was in pain, had failed somewhere, or received a gift, this exclamation remained. On many occasions, the words "God be blessed!" were tied to events or situations that demonstrated to him that God's provident care was clearly leading him on.



task, and the schools suffered as a result. De La Salle began to advise the teachers and to instruct them. He found new recruits to take the place of those who left. He gave them retreats. He even began, to the dismay of his relations, to have them take their meals with him at his dining table. Finally – in a step hardly imaginable for a man of his class – he took them into his home to live with him. Soon, he involved himself even more deeply with them as they became increasingly committed teachers. He left his family home and went to live with his new Brothers – who were becoming a community of religious and dedicated teachers – in a very simple rented house at an undistinguished address in a decidedly poor part of town.

Within five years of this move, the community had adopted a title (Brothers of the Christian Schools) and distinctive clothing (neither "secular" nor "clerical" in style), and vowed obedience to the community. The Brothers staffed a number of charity schools, found more young people interested in joining them in this work, and ran a training center for lay teachers sent to them from rural parishes. They were also being asked to come to other cities, including Paris.

What made the Brothers' schools so unusual and desirable? Turn the page to learn more. ©

People of Influence in John Baptist de La Salle's Life

Jean-Jacques Olier



(1608 – 1657): Although De La Salle was only six years old when Olier died, he nevertheless had a powerful influence in De La Salle's life through the Seminary of Saint Sulpice that De La Salle attended for eighteen months. Olier was pastor of the parish of Saint Sulpice, founder of the Sulpicians, and founder of the Seminary of Saint Sulpice. He was a leading figure in the spirituality movement of the 17th century that is now called the "French School of Spirituality." Exactly fifty years after Olier and two companions took a private vow at Vaugirard to establish the Seminary of Saint Sulpice, De La Salle and two Brothers took the "heroic vow" at Vaugirard to establish the Society of the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

Nicolas Roland



(1642 – 1678): A fellow canon of the Cathedral of Reims, Roland was De La Salle's spiritual director after De La Salle's parents died and he had to leave the seminary to care for his family. Roland guided De La Salle for six years until De La Salle's ordination to the priesthood. He founded the Sisters of the Child Jesus for educating young girls, had a strong commitment to educating the poor, and hoped that De La Salle would become involved in the education of poor boys.

Adrian Nyel



(1621 – 1687): A layman from the diocese of Laon, he was responsible for the schools for the poor in Rouen and trained teachers for that work. In 1679, he came to Reims to establish a similar work there. With the help of De La Salle, he established several such parish schools. Over time, he became less involved with the teachers and the schools while De La Salle become more involved. In 1685 Nyel returned to Rouen to resume his work for the poor of that city, a consecration for life that he had made in 1657.



This engraving shows the country house of Vaugirard on the outskirts of Paris, which became the second cradle of the Institute. The Founder himself lived there from 1691 to 1698.

John Baptist de La Salle maintained a deep appreciation for the restorative power of gardens. His father had rented a garden for the family to use, and De La Salle himself would find gardens for the Brothers to use for prayer and relaxation, if their house did not have a garden attached to it. In one letter De La Salle writes about a Bishop's request, "He wants to install us in the house of Saint Vincent's, which will be quite inconvenient, since it has neither courtyard nor garden." He realized through his own experience that gardens were a privileged means of restoring one's capacity for the difficult work that the Brothers did each day in the school.

3

"The teacher will take great care to see that all read quietly what the reader is reading aloud. From time to time, the teacher will make some of them read a few words in passing, surprising them and finding out if they are following attentively…If the teacher notices that some of them do not like to follow, or more easily or more frequently neglect to do so, the teacher will be careful to make them read last, and even several different times, a little each time, so that the others may also have the time to read."

– From De La Salle's book The Conduct of Christian Schools

What Made These Schools so Unusual and Desirable?

Order and focus. The Brothers brought discipline, order, and focus where there was slackness or chaos. Many a charity school that the Brothers took over had no fixed class schedule, variable school hours, students coming and going at will, no regular prayer or uniform religious instruction, scanty discipline, and excessive attention to manual arts. The Brothers brought a fixed class schedule, daily catechism, regular prayer, fixed arrival and departure times, daily attendance at Mass, and effective instruction in reading and arithmetic.

Appropriate studies. They devised a curriculum appropriate to the needs of these particular students. De La Salle saw that what was needed was a curriculum that would provide the most benefit to the poor during the short time they were able to spend in school. They received effective training in basic academic skills (reading, writing, and arithmetic), social skills (politeness, leadership, and cooperation), and instruction and involvement in the Catholic faith (catechism, daily prayer schedule, and regular Mass attendance).

A community of stable and competent teachers. Most importantly, the Brothers answered the crying need for stable and competent teachers who were trained to their task and dedicated to their students. The job of charity school teacher was not more prestigious or better paid than it had been some years earlier. However, in the Brothers' schools the teaching was done by men who worked as a community and in association, neither for prestige nor for pay but for the glory of God, the salvation of the poor, and the fulfillment of their vocation as part of a community. The presence of such devoted teachers was just what had been lacking to make effective education for the poor and working class a genuine possibility.

Gospel values. De La Salle advised the teachers: "Since you have been called to teach the poor, strive to find Christ in the faces of the poor children you teach. The more you love them, the more will Christ work for you." The perennially surprising truth, which De La Salle and the Brothers embodied anew, is that Gospel values, when truly lived, reverse the accepted values of society. Thus, De La Salle's directive to the Brothers: "Regard your students as the children of God himself. Have much more care for their education and for their instruction than you would have for the children of a king." The success of the schools, however, brought challenges and difficulties. Because the Brothers' schools were well-run and effective, they quickly became popular outside the rolls of the "certified poor." De La Salle established an innovative policy on admissions: no one would be denied admission; and education in the Brothers' schools would be free to all. This novel openness led the syndicates of schoolteachers and guilds of writing masters to see the Brothers as competitors depriving them of fee-paying clientele. There were lawsuits, complaints to ecclesiastical and civil authorities, harassment, even vandalism. A significant amount of De La Salle's energy for twenty years was taken up defending the work of the Brothers – not always successfully – against well-connected opponents. He also had to defend the work against powerful and well-meaning "friends," many of them in the Church: bishops who wished to make the Institute an agency of the diocese, pastors who wanted the Brothers under parochial control, various clerics who wished to meddle not only with the Brothers' educational work but also with their governance, their rule, and even their way of dressing. Although ever reluctant to become involved in lawsuits and public controversies, De La Salle was untiring in defending the Brothers' autonomy as a community.

3

The students will be supplied with ink.
For this purpose, there will be as many inkwells as possible.
They will be made of lead, so that they cannot be overturned. One will be placed between each two students . . . There will be only ink and no cotton in these inkwells.
The ink will be supplied gratuitously."

– From De La Salle's book The Conduct of Christian Schools

Love For Students. Perhaps De La Salle's most fundamental contribution to education is his conviction that at the root of true teaching must lie an authentic love for the students and for the vocation of teaching. He grasped that a truly effective teacher-student relationship must be based on practical affection and mutual respect. In his writings for the Brothers, he pointed out again and again how such a relationship is enacted day by day. Some examples: "Examine before God how you are acting in your ministry and whether you are failing in any of your responsibilities. Come to know yourself just as you are." "Do you have charity and tenderness toward the poor children whom you have to instruct? Do you avail yourself of the affection they have for you to attract them to God? If you show them the firmness of a father, you should also show the tenderness of a mother in gathering them together, and in doing them all the good in your power." "By love and patience, win over the hearts of those whom you teach."

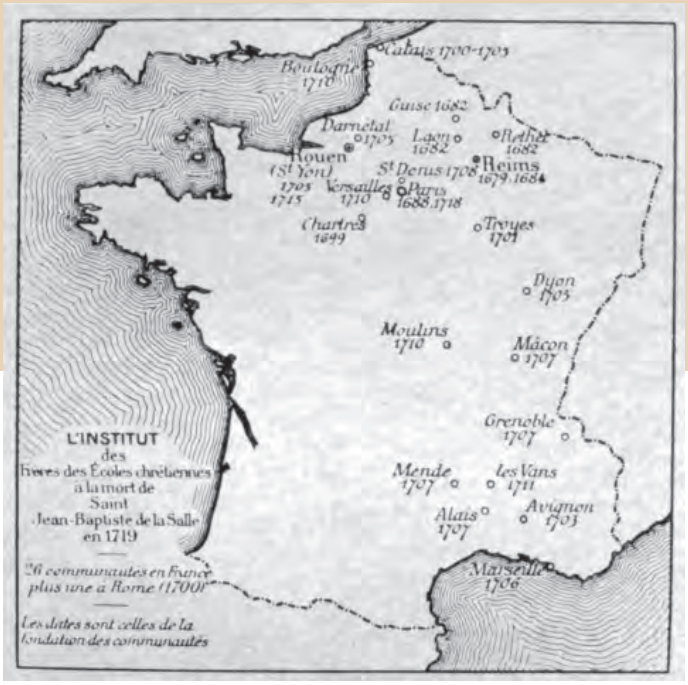
Pedagogy. The method of teaching developed by De La Salle and the Brothers was based on both an abiding respect for the students and a realistic assessment of what they needed to become mature members of society and the church. Along with well-organized practical lessons taught in common, there was instruction in social manners and a host of classroom responsibilities, from ink-distributor to key-keeper to bell-ringer to prayer-leader. The teachers seldom spoke, except when asking a question or when, once a day, they shared a "reflection" on some religious theme in order to inspire the students and speak to them "from the heart to the heart." Each day, there was a catechism lesson and many opportunities for prayer, from the prayer said upon entering the classroom to the singing of a hymn (set to some popular tune) at the end of the day. Daily Mass attendance was expected, and at each hour of the day the bell-ringer would stop all activity for the prayer "Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God." Throughout the school, an atmosphere of respectful silence was maintained, as testified to by an account of a visit to one of the schools: "Their surprise increased when, on entering, they beheld the Brother amid this multitude of light-headed pupils, all as quiet as if they were an audience listening to the sermon of an eloquent preacher. Struck by such a novel spectacle, they stayed for hours, motionless and attentive, hearing the children read, watching the signs of the Brother correcting their mistakes, and admiring the order and silence which reigned there."

The Brothers' schools became places where the young were able to develop intellectually, socially, and spiritually, where they were able to determine where and how to advance in their capacities, and where they experienced an affection and respect not commonly bestowed on the young by the general society of the time.

Conclusion. De La Salle's intervention in the French educational system was truly and quietly revolutionary, thanks to two fundamental contributions. First, he revealed that teaching has a religious as well as a human dimension and that divine love is at the heart of all teaching. Second, he guided into being a stable community of Brothers vowed to associate together for the purpose of keeping schools for the poor. For good reasons, the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, with its essentially independent, non-clerical character and its mission-based, communal ministry of education, has been recognized by historians as a unique addition to the history of education. De La Salle's other contributions to education were many and varied, and have had enduring effects on all primary and secondary education.

What were these contibutions? Turn the page to learn more.

De La Salle and the Brothers were devoted to the work of educating the poor and the working class, but they did not become attached to buildings or places or even specific schools. During the forty years that De La Salle was involved in this enterprise, some 60 schools were established or taken on. By the end of his life, 37 of these schools were still being run by the Brothers. Most of the schools the Brothers operated were schools they had taken over from others, not schools they had started from scratch. De La Salle's genius lay in organizing the schools, training and supervising teachers, and adapting various educational methodologies, thereby generally doing well what had been done poorly by others.



John Baptist de La Salle's Written Works

For the schools:

The Conduct of Christian Schools (in manuscript form until 1720)

Exercises of Piety for the Use of the Christian Schools (1696)

Instructions and Prayers for Holy Mass (1698)

Teaching French Syllables (1698)

How to Go to Confession (1698)

Prayers for Confession and Communion (ca. 1698)

The Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility (1702)

Spiritual Canticles for the Use of the Christian Schools (1703)

The Duties of a Christian (1703)

Christian Public Worship (Volume III of The Duties, 1703)

David's Psalter and the Office of Our Lady (1706)

For the Brothers' Community:

The Common Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools (1705 and 1718)

The Collection of Short Treatises for the Use of the Brothers of the Christian Schools (1705, printed in 1711)

The Rule of the Brother Director of a House of the Institute

Meditations for All the Sundays of the Year and for the Principal Feasts of the Year

Meditations for the Time of the Retreat

Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer

People of Influence in John Baptist de La Salle's Life

Nicholas Barré



(1621 – 1686): A religious priest of the Order of Minims, a talented preacher, and a professor of theology in Paris and Rouen, Barré was one of De La Salle's spiritual guides after the death of Nicholas Roland. He was the founder of several religious orders of women for the education of girls. Barré advised De La Salle to have the teachers live with him in his house and, later, advised him to distribute his wealth to the poor, and to rely solely on God's Providence – as De La Salle had so often advised his teachers to do.

Charles-Maurice Le Tellier



(1641 – 1710): Archbishop of Reims from 1671, he ordained John Baptist de La Salle to the priesthood (April 9, 1678). Well-connected (his father was chancellor to King Louis XIV) and hot-tempered, the archbishop had several encounters with the Founder. De La Salle sought out, and eventually received, permission from him to renounce his office of canon, live in poverty with his Brothers, and finally to leave the Diocese of Reims and extend the work of the Brothers into Paris.

Charles Demia



(1637 – 1689): A priest of the Diocese of Lyons, he organized the Seminary of Saint Charles for the training of both priests and school-teachers. Very interested in schools for the poor, Demia founded an order of Sisters for the education of girls, was responsible for creating a school board in Lyons, and wrote a public treatise called Remonstrances in which he drew attention to the problem of education for the poor. His writings roused public opinion and encouraged many people to become involved in education.

Louis Tronson



(1622 – 1700): The senior spiritual director at the Seminary of Saint Sulpice, Louis Tronson had a great influence on De La Salle with his regular conferences, his extensive writings on seminary life, and his series of published meditations. He was a leading figure at the seminary and later became its superior. Tronson continued to provide guidance to De La Salle after he left the seminary, especially when De La Salle came to establish the Brothers in Paris and found himself in confrontation with the views and ideas of the Parisian clergy.

3

"When the students begin to write, it will be useful and appropriate to give them a stick of the thickness of a pen to hold. On the sticks, there will be three grooves, two on the right and one on the left. These grooves indicate the places where the three fingers should be placed. This teaches the students to hold the pen properly in their fingers and makes them hold these three fingers in a good position."

– From De La Salle's book The Conduct of Christian Schools

De La Salle the Educational Pioneer

Practical curriculum. The curriculum addressed the practical needs and realistic options of the poor. The charity school students were not university-bound or headed for the seminary. The average student in a charity school could not stay more than two or three years, since by age fourteen many of them would have to be at work. Each subject area sought to be as practical as possible. Catechism lessons came from texts that De La Salle wrote, including Duties of a Christian, How to Go to Confession, and the like. The major reading text on politeness was written in a formal cursive script that the students would encounter in society. Writing was practiced with agreements, contracts, and other such practical documents. Simple mathematics focused on the French monetary system. Students were grouped by ability, and teachers made sure that a student had mastered one level before moving to the next.







French, not Latin. It was customary to teach spelling and reading with Latin words rather than with French ones. But De La Salle saw that the charity school students needed facility in reading and writing the everyday language of business, commerce, and catechesis, not a language that they would little use. De La Salle had to explain and defend the Brothers' policy of instruction in the vernacular. He also wrote Teaching French Syllables to teach reading in the native tongue. This syllabary was widely used in French primary schools for 150 years after his death and is credited by French historians as one contributing reason for the eventual standardization of French pronunciation throughout the country.

Simultaneous method of instruction. It had been customary for teachers to engage one student at a time in a classroom of dozens of students. While the rest idly occupied themselves, or worked at some minor trade to supplement the teacher's income, one student would be called up to the teacher for one-on-one recitation. De La Salle did away with this inefficient method. The Brothers' new method was to divide a large class into small groups according to their level of learning and to involve the groups simultaneously in the lesson. De La Salle wrote instructions on how to involve the whole class by posing questions and subquestions and by having one student repeat or correct another's answer. The goal was to engage every student every day in as many ways as possible.

Teacher Training. "To teach," wrote De La Salle, "you must first know." He not only established pedagogical training for the Brothers but also created

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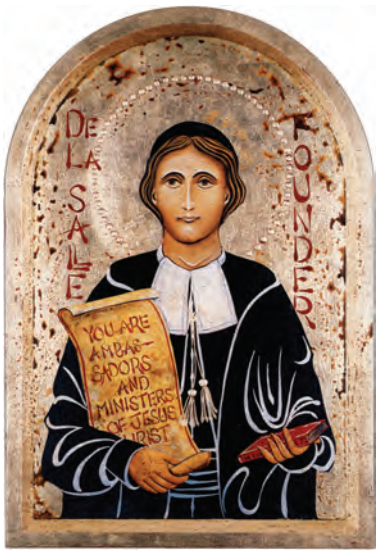
"At each hour of the day, some short prayers will be said. These will help the teachers to recollect themselves and recall the presence of God; it will serve to accustom the students to think of God from time to time and to offer God all their actions, and so to draw upon themselves God's blessing."

– From De La Salle's book The Conduct of Christian Schools

centers for the training of lay teachers who would serve in rural parish schools. Country priests begged De La Salle to send just one Brother to their charity schools, but De La Salle would never send fewer than two, since two is a minimal community and Brothers lived and labored in community. Instead, he took in young men sent by the pastors and trained them as teachers, for free, before sending them back to their parishes. He founded three separate training institutes for rural schoolteachers over a thirty-year period. Each closed after a short time either because of lawsuits by opponents in the educational establishment or because local needs had been fulfilled. But they were quite effective, and historians credit De La Salle with pioneering teacher-training schools in France.

Psychological observation. De La Salle wrote, "All minds are not attracted in the same way and it is necessary to know how to deal with each in order to lead it to give itself over to the task." De La Salle and the Brothers studied each child's capability, character, and needs, and passed their notes on to the next teacher when the student moved on. This sort of psychological observation became widespread in the 18th and 19th centuries and is now habitual. Thanks in part to such observations, the modern concept of "childhood" as a distinct phase of growth has gradually come to be common wisdom. An example of one such note: "Francis Delevieux; 8 1/2, two years at school, in 3rd section of Writing since July 1st. Somewhat turbulent; little piety at church or prayers unless supervised. Lacks reserve. Conduct satisfactory; needs encouragement to effort; punishment of no avail; light-headed. Rarely absent except when with bad companions; often late. Application moderate but he learns with ease. Twice nearly sent down for negligence. Submissive to a strong hand. Not a difficult character. Must be won over. Spoilt at home. Parents resent his being punished."

Bending Social Barriers. In their charity schools the Brothers charged nothing, accepted no gifts, and allowed no distinctions between those who could afford to pay and those who could not. De La Salle instructed the school inspectors: "Have books for every lesson, with as many as necessary for the poor who have none of their own. There should also be enough writing paper for the impoverished writers who have none of their own." He repeatedly told the Brothers: "Be conscious of the poor, and try to overcome the tendency to give more attention to those better off than to those who have less." As more children of families who were better off came into the schools, boys from bourgeois families studied, played, and prayed with poor boys, and vice versa.



Icon of De La Salle by Br. William Woeger, FSC

Civility and manners. The first reading book assigned to students of sufficient skill was a book that De La Salle wrote, titled The Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility. De La Salle wanted his pupils to learn how to act in the larger world. As the Brothers taught the boys reading and religion and math, so they taught them social and civil virtues, virtues very much De La Salle's own – politeness, fairness, self-control, graciousness, prudence, and self-discipline. This book, like his French speller, was republished many times in the succeeding two centuries and was widely used even outside the Brothers' schools.

"Your zeal for the pupils under your guidance would be very imperfect if you expressed it only in words. It will become perfect only if you practice yourself what you are teaching them."

– From De La Salle's Meditations

New Types of Schools

Technical Secondary School: The traditional Latin school, with its conventional literary curriculum, did not offer the technical and scientific courses that the energetic and growing class of lower bourgeoisie (shopkeepers, merchants, artisans, draftsmen) wanted for their children. At the request of such parents, De La Salle started a boarding school at Saint Yon that offered courses in geography, bookkeeping, accounting, architecture, mechanics, music, and more. This has been identified by historians as a forerunner of the modern secondary school.

Weekend School for Workers: In Paris, at the request of the pastor of Saint Sulpice, De La Salle opened a school which met for three hours on Sunday afternoon, where men up to age twenty who had to work all week could learn reading, writing, math, and religion, and get some technical training. This school proved to be quite popular and is another example of the effort by De La Salle and the Brothers to fulfill the real educational needs of their time and society.

Homes for Troubled Youth: At Saint Yon, De La Salle started a school specifically for difficult and refractory boys who in modern terms would be called juvenile delinquents and wards of the court. As their behavior and skills improved, they were able to join the normal curriculum. So good were the results with juveniles that De La Salle, at the request of the president of the regional court, opened a similar facility for certain adults who for various reasons were ordered confined by the courts. These effective programs of rehabilitation through education were, as one historian puts it, "two centuries ahead of their time." Notably, De La Salle was known throughout his life as an effective confessor for "hardened sinners" and in his retirement at Saint Yon he spent much of his time both with the novices, teaching them about prayer, and with these hard cases, teaching them about God through his presence and conversation.



Statue of De La Salle by Lejeune, placed in Reims in 1951 to commemorate the 300th anniversary of his birth.

"Painting by Giovanni Gagliardi, 1901. The first school of the Brothers in Paris was that of the Rue Princesse in the parish of Saint Sulpice. The pastor, M. de La Chétardye, is shown here visiting the school. This man of great qualities had very strained relations with the Founder, supporting the Brothers and their work but opposing De La Salle's leadership in subtle ways. One of the most popular portraits of the Founder is taken from this painting, using only that portion containing his head." (From E. Rousset's Iconographie)



"Since it is your responsibility to teach your students about God, you must first become aware of the action of God in your life. Teach by example. Put into practice what you want your students to believe."

– From De La Salle's Meditations



The statue of De La Salle by Aureli in the Basilica of Saint Peter in Rome. Part of the gallery of founders of religious congregations, it stands some five meters in height and weighs twenty-three tons. It is often picked out by Lasallians by means of the guiding outstretched arm and is the only statue in the gallery of Saint Peter's that includes children.

Examples from De La Salle's Meditations on the topic of serving as an example to students:

I "Since it is your responsibility to teach your students about God, you must first become aware of the action of God in your life. Teach by example. Put into practice what you want your students to believe."

I "Example makes a much greater impression on the minds and hearts of the young than do words. Young people . . . ordinarily model themselves on the example of their teachers. That your words may produce their full effect on your students, preach by example and practice what you wish them to accept."

I "You will lead your disciples to practice virtue far more easily by giving them the example of a wise and reserved conduct than by anything you can say."

I "Your zeal for the pupils under your guidance would be very imperfect if you expressed it only in words. It will become perfect only if you practice yourself what you are teaching them. Your example makes a much greater impression on minds and hearts than words do. Students are led more readily to do what they see done for them than to carry out what they hear told them, particularly when the words they hear are not in harmony with the actions they see."

I "If you wish your disciples to practice virtue, do so yourself."

Examples from De La Salle's book The Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility

I "It is highly unbecoming to comb your hair in public, but the offense becomes quite intolerable if you do so in church. That is one place where you should be very neat and clean out of the respect you have toward God."

I "It is against decorum to spit in front of yourself while with others, or to spit too far, so that you have to go looking for the spittle in order to step on it. In places that are usually kept clean, turn aside slightly and spit into your handkerchief, then fold it immediately without looking at it, and replace it in your pocket."

I "Here are the circumstances in which you should remove your hat:

1) in a place where there are important people;
2) when you greet someone;
3) when you give or receive anything;
4) when you are being seated at the table;
5) when you hear the names of Jesus or Mary;
6) when you are in the presence of persons to whom you owe great respect."

I "It is not appropriate to wear a feather behind your ear or to put flowers in your ear or to have pierced ears with earrings. This is most inappropriate for a man, for it is a sign of slavery, which is not at all becoming."

I "At table, it is rude to use your napkin to wipe your face, even more so to rub your teeth with it. It would be gross and uncivilized to blow your nose in your napkin. It is also unbecoming to wipe plates and other dishes with your napkin."

I "It is entirely contrary to decorum to grow overexcited when you play. Still, you should not play in a careless manner nor lose deliberately as a way of flattering your opponents. This would make the person with whom you are playing think that you care little about contributing to his enjoyment in a well-played match."

I "Those who have nothing to relate except gossip and frivolous, silly stories, and those who affect introductions so long that nobody else can speak, would do better to keep quiet. It is far better to gain a reputation for being a person of few words than to bore people with nonsense and stupidities or always to have something to say."



John Baptist de La Salle:
A Saint for Teachers

There are saints who seem larger than life, who led dramatic lives of heroic virtue and brightened their part of the world in such a way that they became almost household names - St. Francis, St. Teresa, St. Dominic, among others. Then there are other saints who are less well-known, who led lives of quiet inspiration, elevating their given corner of the world to a higher level. They discovered and showed us opportunities for holiness that we had not known about before. John Baptist de La Salle is such a saint. He taught and exemplified, in a way that no one before him had done, that education is a spiritual undertaking and that the teacher has a religious vocation. He guided into being a community of teachers devoted to living out that truth. As one historian has written of De La Salle and the founding of the Institute, "It is the first time in the history of religious communities that the teaching ministry is set out as being by itself a way of Christian perfection."

John Baptist de La Salle never thought that he was saintly or holy. Quite the opposite. He merely tried to live his life as all Christians are called to live – faithful to the Gospel and charitable toward all. But today he is celebrated as the patron saint of teachers. The reason De La Salle is a saint is that he lived the life God asked him to live, with patience, persistence, and genuine humility. He didn't look for quick results, he stuck to what he started, and he didn't much care how others saw him, only how God saw him.

Yet his complete devotion to God made his insight into the world around him all the more



revealing, and rendered his encounter with that world all the more fruitful. As one biographer has said, "It was the interplay of human factors, not mystical insights, that served to reveal God's will to John Baptist de La Salle and to move him along the path of his journey." De La Salle's spirituality is embodied in his practical responses to each event in his life. And in his spiritual life we find the pattern for our own. Like the DNA pattern that

This painting by Gagliardi shows De La Salle and the community of teachers at prayer in June 1686 in the church of Notre-Dame de Liesse. The men had just adopted the name "Brothers of the Christian Schools," had approved their distinctive habit, and had taken a vow of obedience.



"In order for you to fulfill this duty with as much perfection and exactness as God requires of you, frequently give yourselves to the Spirit of our Lord to act in your work only under his influence . . . This Holy Spirit, then, will come upon them generously, so that they will be able to possess fully the Christian spirit."

sets the blueprint for a living organism, De La Salle's unique presence continues to shape our lived reality – a reality that has grown from a hundred Brothers in three dozen schools in France in 1719, to some 80,000 Lasallian educators in almost a thousand educational institutions in more than 80 countries.

In 1900 John Baptist de La Salle was declared a saint in the Catholic Church, and in 1950 he was declared the patron saint of teachers. Clearly, the enduring movement he began for "human and Christian education" is not only educational but also spiritual, a movement that has the school as its setting, the teacher as its instrument, and the salvific potential of education as its inspiration.



What, then, was the spirituality of the Founder, and what does he teach us about Lasallian education as a spiritual path? Read on to learn more.

open to the Holy Spirit

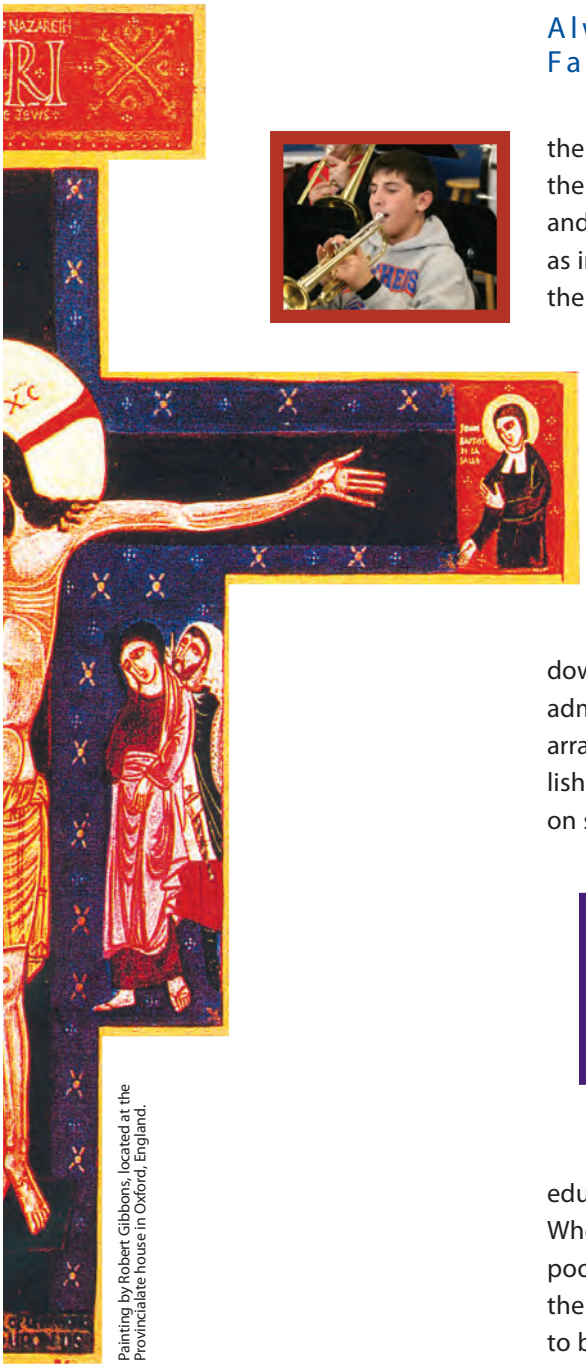
For De La Salle, the Holy Spirit was as real and alive as the students who gathered in the classroom each day. It was because of the Spirit of Jesus that he had become involved in this work in the first place, and it was the dynamic presence of the Spirit that transformed the teaching encounter into a means of salvation for both students and teachers.

The key elements in this transformation are the attitudes we have, the actions we take, and the articulations we make. De La Salle urged his teachers to pray constantly for their students and to bring all their daily teaching concerns to God. He told his teachers that they should look upon their students as Jesus would. When Jesus is taken seriously and when the dynamic mystery of God's life in the midst of the teaching ministry is engaged, the Holy Spirit bursts forth with unexpected strength and abundant grace. Approaching situations with the dispositions of Jesus, and moving forward in deliberate action based on those dispositions, brought God's own dynamic into play.





"Do not distinguish between the duties of your state and what pertains to your salvation and perfection. Rest assured that you will never effect your salvation more certainly and that you will never acquire greater perfection than by fulfilling well the duties of your state, provided you do so with a view to accomplishing the will of God."



Painting by Robert Gibbons, located at the Provincialate house in Oxford, England.

Always With Faith and Zeal

What else but faith drove the young De La Salle to take up the task of organizing committed and competent teachers for schools as impoverished and neglected as the families they served? What else but faith fed his persistence in that work when all human indications urged him to abandon it?

De La Salle answered the demands of faith before the demands of society. Where society insisted on class distinctions, De La Salle broke down those distinctions by his admissions policies and class seating arrangements. Where society established educational limitations based on status, De La Salle brought



education to those without status. Where society had allotted to the poor just enough schooling to keep them under control as they waited to begin a life of labor, De La Salle provided education as a means of liberating the poor and providing them with some hope for the future.

His faith was sustained and expressed not only by the devotional on-your-knees kind of prayer, but also by the relational at-your-side kind of prayer. If De La Salle placed pebbles on his kneeler so that he would stay awake during long hours of prayer, he also wrote thousands of individual monthly letters to his associates, giving advice, urging them on, and sharing in their specific responsibilities.

De La Salle came to understand his work and the work of the schools as an expression of a single spirit that consisted of two parts, faith and zeal. The spirit of faith is the spirit that lets us look at situations from God's viewpoint rather than our own. We begin to find new insights, new talents, and new challenges as this spirit of faith becomes habitually exercised. The spirit of zeal describes a kind of drive that animates a person who is fully committed to Christian education. Zeal makes sure that whatever needs to be done will be done. Such zeal is found each day — in classrooms and offices, in student activities and athletic programs, in committee meetings and training sessions — throughout the Lasallian world. Because it is based on a recognition of God's ongoing life in the midst of the world, zeal inspires a confident and creative approach to one's daily challenges.

"One of the main concerns of those who instruct others is to be able to understand their students and to discern the right way to guide them. There are those who call for much patience, those who need to be stimulated and spurred on... This guidance requires understanding and discernment of spirits, qualities you should frequently and earnestly ask of God, for they are most necessary for you in the guidance of those placed in your care."

Gospel-based Equality

In De La Salle's day, the quality of one's educational life depended on social standing, financial resources, and academic interest. De La Salle and the Brothers bypassed these influences by insisting that all students be treated the same and as if they were sons of the king (social standing made no difference), by requiring that everyone receive their education gratuitously (no tuition or gifts were accepted), and by providing an education that cultivated student engagement (the curriculum was practical). As a result, no one could easily categorize the Brothers' schools within the structures of the time, and many "professional educators" were upset with what they saw as intrusions into their livelihood.

Here were schools that took the Gospel seriously, teaching those whom society had labeled socially unworthy, financially undeserving, and academically inadequate. The students were taught reading with a text by De La Salle that outlined how to become socially adept. They were accepted without reference to family wealth, while those of better means were encouraged to share their benefits with those of lesser means, both academically and practically. They were all seen as rich in individual talents, and each pupil's gifts were specifically identified by their teachers.



On Thursdays, the Brothers enjoyed an afternoon of relaxation, which often included a walk, as depicted here in an engraving by Gautier.



"When a person abandons himself to the Providence of God, it is like a man who puts himself out to the high sea without either sails or oars."





Radical Trust in God

De La Salle's trust in God's continual and loving care shaped the educational enterprise that he developed. His surrender to the designs of God's Providence was a conscious decision, a daily recommitment. This does not mean, however, that De La Salle was passive or submissive. It isn't that he passively "abandoned himself" to the circumstances placed in his path, but that he had a radical trust in God's activity. He wrote, "I will always look upon the work of my salvation, and the foundation and government of our community as the work of God, hence I will abandon the care of both to Him…I will often consider myself as an instrument which is of no use except in the hands of the workman."

De La Salle was indeed put to use by God. His personality, social standing, priestly vocation, religious demeanor, and multiple responsibilities brought him into full and deep engagement with the world around him. He was quite aware of everything happening in the political, social, and religious worlds within which he and the Brothers dwelt, and he was not timid about responding to the problems and puzzles that came his way. His constant response to all was "God be blessed." His deep conviction was that God's Providence spoke to him in the events of his life. God remains in the lead: "I don't like to make the first move in any endeavor . . . I leave it to Divine Providence to make the first move and then I am satisfied."

Virtually every educational project he undertook was a practical response to a direct request. The Gospel came to life in serving real educational needs in concrete situations. The schools were thus an extension of God's care to students who had experienced little care in their lives. De La Salle's profound dependence on the graces hidden in day-to-day circumstances led to schools where young people could depend on teachers who shared such hidden graces in their day-to-day ministry.

"Christian schools should be in no respect inferior to others; parents who give them preference on moral and religious grounds should not have occasion to regret that their children do not find therein all other educational advantages."

Gratuity and Accessibility

The more De La Salle became involved in education, the more needs he saw and tried to fulfill – needs for terminal primary schools, continuation schools, teacher-training schools, and more.

Two qualities in his response were constant. First, the education was given without compensation from students or parents. The schools were to be accessible to all. Each student was treated alike in terms of opportunity and treated individually in terms of capacities. Second, the schools prepared students for Christian life within their particular society. Their education included whatever was necessary for them to be successful in that society and whatever was necessary for them to live as mature Christians. The students' salvation required both religious formation and pragmatic education, both habits of Christian life and skills for success.

The education that De La Salle and his followers provided paid attention to the heart of all education – integrated lives in right relationship with reality, which includes the reality of God. If education enables one to acquire all the skills and all the knowledge necessary for life in secular society but fails to instill particular habits of charity, personal principles of spiritual life, or a growing wisdom that places one's endeavors within a wider context, then such education will have essentially failed to provide the necessities of life.





Preferential Option for the Poor

"Every day you have poor children to instruct. Love them tenderly . . . following in this the example of Jesus Christ. Prefer them to those who are not poor …Be faithful and exact to do this without any payment, so that you can say with Saint Paul, 'The source of my consolation is to announce the Gospel free of charge, without having it cost anything to those who hear me.'"

Commitment to the education of the poor works hand in hand with a commitment to the Gospel itself, and for Lasallians it is a great legacy and a great challenge. The centrality of this commitment began with De La Salle and the first schools. De La Salle established educational institutions that directly addressed an ingrained and debilitating societal cycle in France. The "poor" of his day were the vast majority of the population, limited in resources, abilities, and security. Their opportunities for personal advancement were virtually nonexistent. Illiteracy, vice, and indigence fed on one another, allowing little light – either spiritual or intellectual – to pierce the darkness. De La Salle's response was to provide well-organized schools with caring, dependable teachers who provided a comprehensive, free, and faith-centered education.

These schools would not accept societal distinctions among students based on wealth, status, or influence. All were welcome, and it was understood that no tuition or favor would be accepted. Concern for the poor was fundamental but not exclusive. Indeed, the Brothers faced lawsuits because they did not confine themselves to teaching the certified poor. Gratuitous schools open to everyone are a dangerous thing.

De La Salle was convinced that the essential gratuity of education was a Gospel value. "It is a great gift of God, this grace he has given you to be entrusted with the instruction of children, to announce the Gospel to them and to bring them up in the spirit of religion . . ." Authentic teaching, such as the kind of teaching that occurs throughout the New Testament, is a gift that can neither be measured nor paid for. It is a manifestation of God's grace – something that happens without expectation of acknowledgment or immediate reward.

"In order to bring the children whom you instruct to take on the Christian spirit, you must teach them the practical truths of faith in Jesus Christ and the maxims of the holy Gospel with at least as much care as you teach the truths that are purely doctrinal."



Stained glass window of John Baptist de La Salle with student from the Provincialate Chapel at Mont La Salle, Napa, California.

School as Faith Community

De La Salle became acutely aware of two realities: (1) God wanted everyone to be saved; (2) many neglected children were far from salvation. He came to see that his teachers could make the Gospel a reality in their students' lives by making it a reality in their own lives. By their own example, and with a well-organized program of Christian formation, the Brothers could help bring the Gospel within reach of their students.

De La Salle's followers called themselves "Brothers of the Christian Schools" because their focus was the school. One of the major tasks of these Christian Schools was to bring the young to understand and enter into the fullness of life that was their inheritance as children of God. The practical maxims of the Gospel, along with the many details of school life that bore witness to a deliberate, Christian perspective, brought the reality of salvation into the classroom. Concern for "salvation" on the practical level went hand-in-hand with "salvation" on the spiritual level. Students grew into their faith in an environment that by its very nature and methods saturated their school lives with God's life.



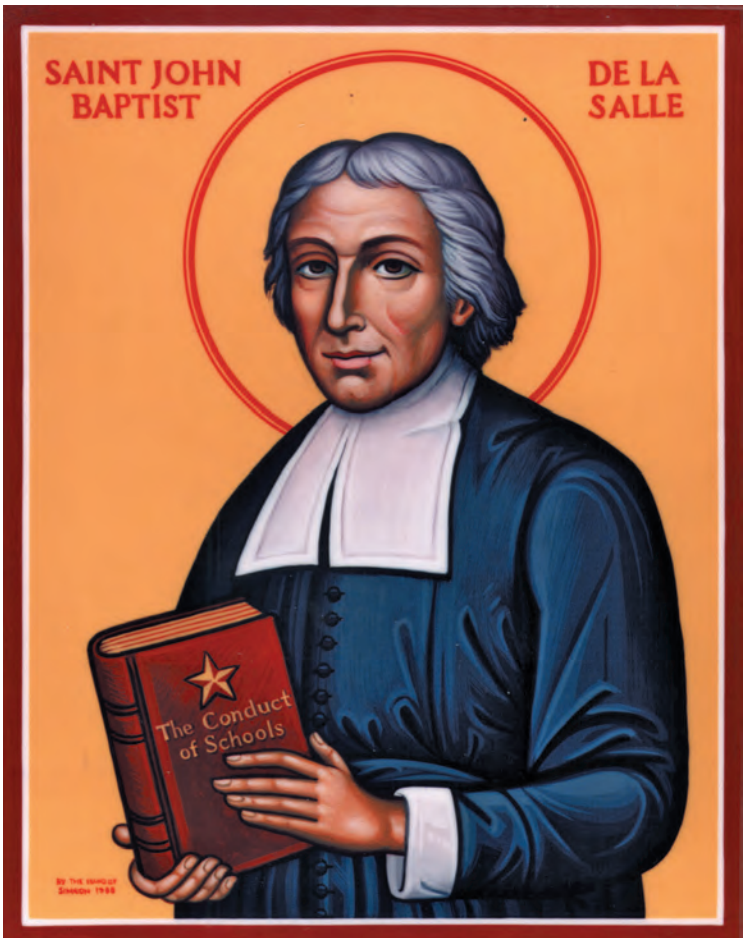
The schools were solidly schools within the Catholic tradition. The context of a vibrant Catholic heritage provided the means for developing what we today would call a "faith community." De La Salle instructed the teachers, "Teach them to lead good lives, by instructing them in the mysteries of our faith and by inspiring them with Christian maxims, and thus give them a suitable education." Brother John Johnston, FSC, has said, "Our charism in the Church is to make the loving and saving presence of Jesus Christ a visible and effective reality in the world of education."

"Every day you have poor children to instruct. Love them tenderly . . . following in this the example of Jesus Christ. Prefer them to those who are not poor . . . Be faithful and exact to do this without any payment, so that you can say with Saint Paul, 'The source of my consolation is to announce the Gospel free of charge, without having it cost anything to those who hear me.'"

"Mystical Realism"

De La Salle's spirituality has been called "mystical realism," for he combined a deep appreciation for God and a deep understanding of God's world. He didn't avoid the practical but embraced it. De La Salle did not write about educational philosophy – he wrote educational handbooks and textbooks, on everything from French syllables to Gospel maxims to the rules of politeness. The schools were eminently practical: written work concentrated on contracts and ledgers; arithmetic lessons dealt with finance and business; young men who worked all week could come on Sunday to learn mathematics, drafting, and commerce; and schools on the seacoast included classes on navigation and seamanship.

Such a commitment to the real needs of students was not without difficulties. When the Guild of Writing Masters sued the Brothers for teaching writing – and won – De La Salle ignored the judgment and found other ways of teaching writing. When the Bishop of Chartres challenged the practice of teaching reading by starting with French instead of Latin, De La Salle held his ground and wrote a detailed, and persuasive, defense of the practicality of this method. The welfare of the students entrusted to his care always inspired him to find practical means for practical ends.



A recent icon of John Baptist de La Salle by Simeon at Monastery Icons (www.monasteryicons.com)

His spirituality was such that he looked upon both his blessings and his challenges as gifts from God. He wrote, "If my work does not come from God, I would consent to its ruin. I would join our enemies in destroying it . . . But if God declares himself its defender, let us fear nothing . . . " This fearlessness was part of the practical side of his "mystical realism."

Creativity and Courage

"The students must understand what you say, so you must give them instructions adapted to their capacity; otherwise what you say would be of little use."

The marvelously practical side of De La Salle's spirituality is shown in the creativity and courage with which he carried out his mission. Courage? He gave up his inheritance, social position, and chances of ecclesiastical preferment; he distributed his fortune to feed the poor; he took an "heroic vow"

"Union in a community is a precious gem, which is why Our Lord so often recommended it to his disciples before he died. If we lose this, we lose everything. Preserve it with care, therefore, if you want your community to survive."

to establish the Institute even if he had to live on bread alone; he withstood years of relentless attempts to destroy or co-opt the young society of Brothers. Creativity? De La Salle and the Brothers came up with innovative methods for teaching reading, handwriting, mathematics, and religion, and for grasping each student's needs by means of a personalized record of strengths and weaknesses, family relationships, and the approaches that worked best.

According to one author, there was an "unruffled boldness" in how De La Salle responded to the needs around him, opening and closing schools according to the designs of Providence. This boldness came from a conviction that God works through us and through our creativity. De La Salle came to realize that when we are creative in responding to what we know needs to be done, and when we act with fortitude, we share in God's life in our midst and are able to step forward to even greater tasks, which he saw as a kind of reward. "God gives two kinds of rewards in this world to those who commit themselves untiringly to the work of the salvation of souls. First, he gives them an abundance of grace; second, he gives them a more extended ministry and a greater ability to procure the conversion of souls."



Together and by Association

De La Salle realized that the schools would be successful and stable only if the teachers were united by a common vision, a shared dedication, and a supportive community. From the first retreat that he gave them in his house in 1681 to his last General Assembly with them in 1717, he worked to knit his teachers into a religiously animated group of Christian educators who worked in, with, and through association.

The experience of association is found on a number of levels within the Lasallian educational enterprise. The early Brothers lived in a common house centrally situated among several schools, and established practices that would deepen their association, such as monthly correspondence with De La Salle, "Brother Visitors" for each region, and an annual retreat. In the schools, the students were associated in new ways, with classes taught to an entire group (the novel "simultaneous method"). Students found that they all had the same expectations placed on them, regardless of their social status. Students worked together, prayed together, and grew into Christian maturity together.

And the Brothers did all of this work together in a particular way. They discussed and dealt with school methodologies, community affairs, and common concerns in a way that was largely unlike that of their contemporary religious orders. De La Salle provided a kind of leadership that trusted both in God's Providence and in the best intentions of his Brothers. An early biographer writes that De La Salle "had resolved to introduce nothing by authority and wished to give them attraction for virtue without constraint…"

This kind of association has persisted through the centuries, has shaped Lasallian school life, and emerges from the consistent spirituality that was De La Salle's own.



"You must, then, look upon this work entrusted to you by pastors, by fathers and mothers, as one of the most important and most necessary services in the church. For you lay the foundation for the building of the church."

A NEw Lay Vocation

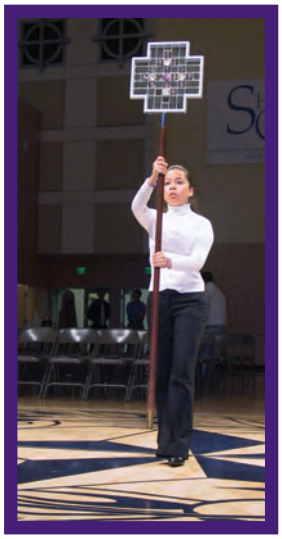
A Christian Brother is sometimes asked, "Why didn't you go all the way and become a priest?" The short answer is usually, "Because God called me to be a Brother, not a priest." The vocation of Christian Brother is a call to educational ministry, not to sacramental ministry. It is a lay vocation that has more in common with the people in the pew than with the pastor in the pulpit.

De La Salle established a teaching order of men who were to be neither "seculars" nor "clerics." They were to be dedicated to teaching as "Brothers," consecrated to procuring God's glory and the salvation of the young through the ministry of Christian and human education. Brothers were not to be involved in clerical affairs; their place was with the students. The Brothers' communal prayer in those days was not the recitation of the Divine Office, but rather the prayers recommended by the church for all its members. The Brothers were not clerics but laypeople. Thus they were situated, and challenged, to provide an example of "horizontal" Christian virtue to all with whom they came in contact. Their ministry lay in their encounter, as teachers, with students and parents. And the value of the teaching encounter is what Lasallian educators today still use as a touchstone.

This lay character allows for, encourages, and empowers the sense of companionship, the down-to-earthness, that characterizes the relationships found within a Lasallian school. There is a care for one another like that of an extended family. There is a sense of solidarity among all Lasallians, who know from daily experience the many modalities of the lay vocations that have sprung from the spiritual inspiration of John Baptist de La Salle:







"It is not enough that children be kept in school for most of the day and be kept busy. Those who have dedicated themselves to instruct them must devote themselves especially to bring them up in the Christian spirit, which gives children the wisdom of God that none of the princes of this world have known."

For those who follow De La Salle, the world of education continues to be the world in which the Gospel can come to life, especially through the relationships that are fostered in school community. At Lasallian schools students and parents and teachers begin to feel what it's like to take part in a genuine community. With all of its struggles and challenges, a subtle and profound thing happens in a Lasallian school that doesn't happen everywhere – a purposeful, shared effort toward education through companionship and compassion.

"Be satisfied with what you can do, since God is satisfied with it, but do not spare yourself in what you can do with grace; and believe that, provided you want it, you can do more with the grace of God than you think."



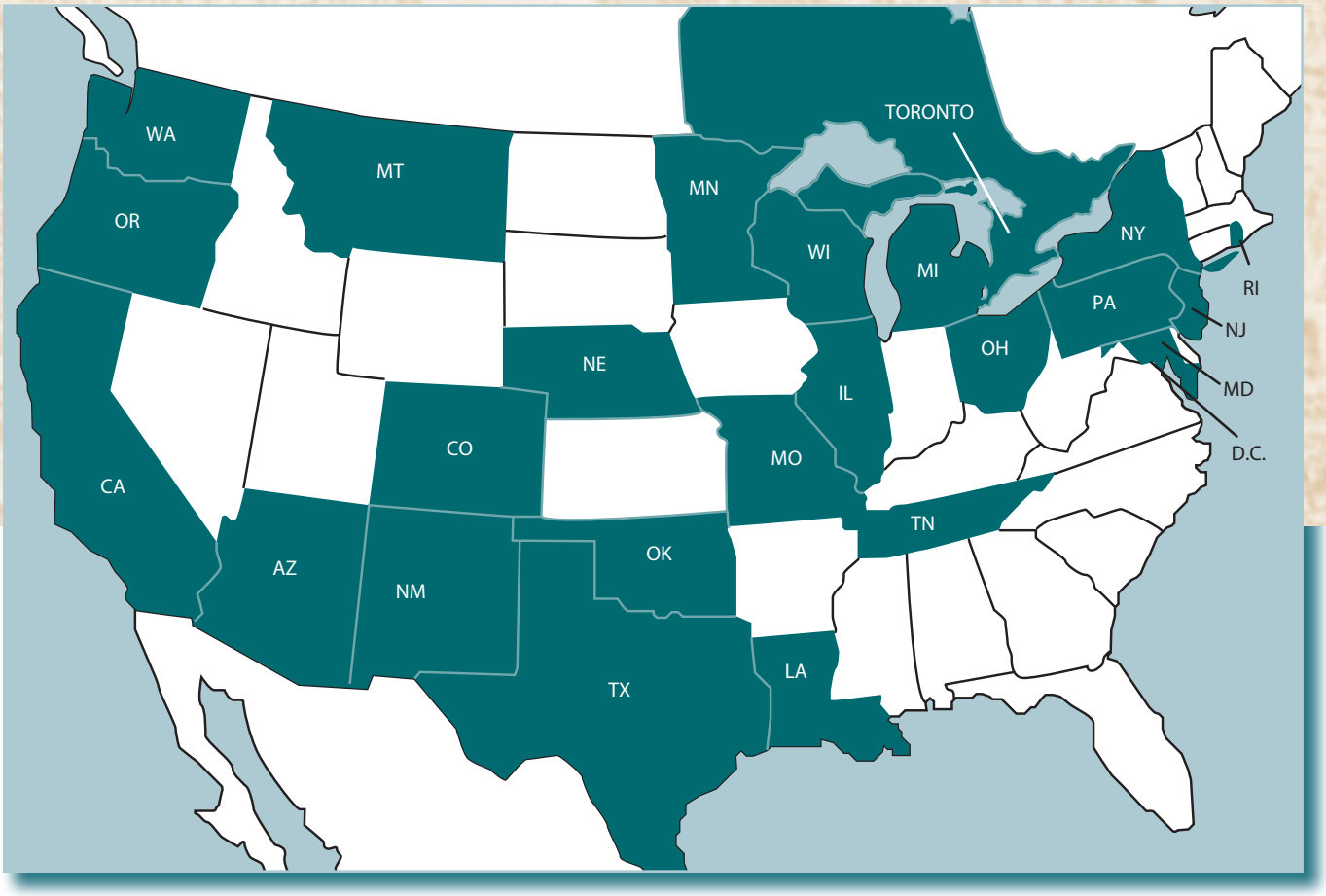
St. John Baptist de La Salle (1651–1719),
founder of the Christian Brothers, patron saint of teachers.
This statue by Bruce Wolfe is at Saint Mary's College of California.

The spirituality that is our legacy from John Baptist de La Salle forms authentic persons, inspires true relationships, and builds effective communities. Today, as in De La Salle's day, it is the mystery of the human person and the mystery of human relationships that are the true subjects of Lasallian education, ones that bear unavoidably divine echoes.

Lasalian education has become a worldwide phenomenon, serving students and engaging educators in diverse cultures and countries. For maps of the Lasallian world today, turn the page. ©



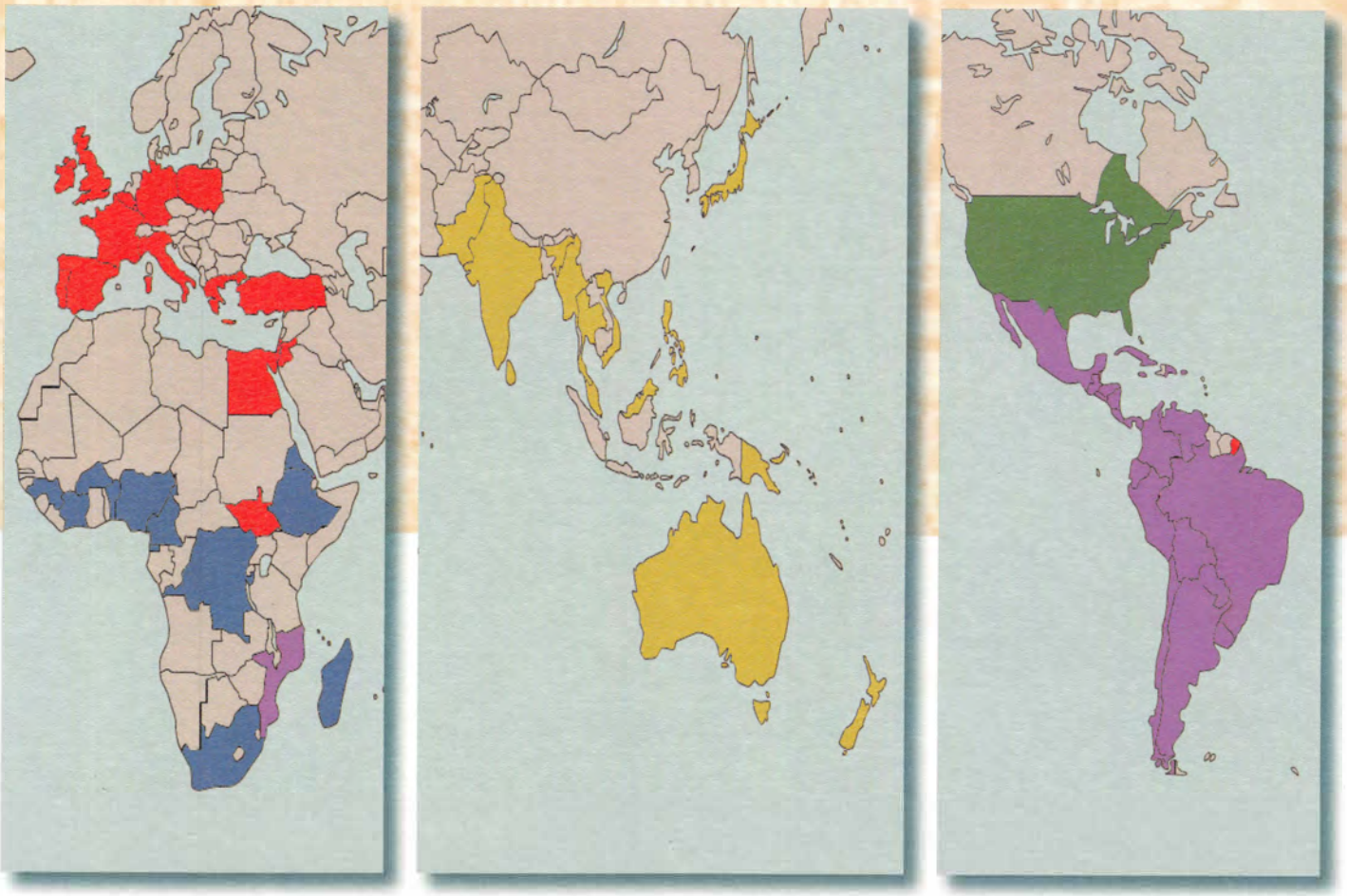
The Lasallian



The De La Salle Christian Brothers in the United States continue to fulfill their mission of providing "a human and Christian education to the young, especially the poor, according to the ministry which the Church has entrusted to them." In the United States and Toronto Region, Lasallian learning communities are located in the areas colored in green above. Lasallian secondary schools, which now number well over fifty, comprise the largest network of Catholic secondary schools in the U.S. A total of some one hundred and twenty schools and programs, ranging from store-front tutoring centers to prestigious universities, are now in existence, with new schools and innovative educational services continuing to be established in response to the needs of local communities who are underserved.

The United States and Toronto Region is served by the Christian Brothers Conference at www.lasallian.info. To learn about the Brothers' vocation, visit www.brothersvocation.org.

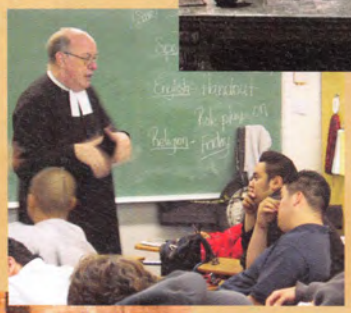
World Today



In approximately eighty countries around the world, the De La Salle Christian Brothers and their thousands of lay Partners answer educational needs both in formal institutions — more than sixty colleges and universities, some nine hundred secondary and primary schools — and in innovative service programs that reach out to those without access to conventional educational institutions. More than one million students benefit from the efforts of Lasallian educators around the globe. In awarding UNESCO's Noma Prize, the United Nations declared that the De La Salle Christian Brothers have "demonstrated permanency by providing for over three centuries an astonishing array of activities from the most basic literacy learning to the most complicated technological learning for both children and adults…so that they can be fully integrated into community and society." Mother Teresa of Calcutta told the Brothers, "Be faithful to the great gift that God made you to be teachers, educators, light – His light in the world among young people. The future of the world depends on what you do."

Complete information on the global Lasallian mission is available through the Generalate in Rome. The Generalate is on the Internet at www.lasalle.org.







Lasallian Education and the De La Salle Christian Brothers

For more than three hundred years, the De La Salle Christian Brothers have provided "a human and Christian education to the young, especially the poor." What is the story of the founding of this unique educational mission? Who was the man who in 1680 formed the small community of teachers that eventually grew into the Catholic Church's largest order of religiously vowed men devoted exclusively to education? This is the story of John Baptist de La Salle — a man of God, an innovator in education, an advocate for the poor, and the Patron Saint of Teachers.











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