

St. John Baptist de La Salle

F A I T H



C O M M U N I T Y



S E R V I C E



Who was John Baptist de La Salle?

He was a French priest in the 17th century who came from a well-to-do family and was on the fast-track of a priestly career when he became involved with a group of men who were teaching poor children in parish charity schools. Within about five years he became completely devoted to the education of these children and to the training of these men, forming them into a dedicated, competent, committed, and holy group of educators whose whole lives were dedicated to the ministry of teaching, to the students entrusted to their care, to each other, and through all of these ... to God.

Did he want to get involved in education?

No, he got involved without meaning to do so. Much later in his life, De La Salle said that if he had known what his charitable help with those first schoolmasters would have led to, he would have dropped the whole thing immediately. But, he says, God “who guides all things with wisdom and serenity, whose way it is not to force the inclinations of persons, willed to commit me entirely to the development of the schools. He did this in an imperceptible way and over a long period of time so that one commitment led to another in a way that I did not foresee in the beginning.”

What happened once he did get involved?

Once involved, he gave away his wealth and became fully associated with the Brothers and with education. In the process, he wrote a school handbook that became a standard for Catholic education throughout Europe, a set of meditations for teachers, textbooks for students in the areas of reading, politeness, religious education, and many other works. By the end of his life in 1719 there were some 23 houses of Brothers teaching throughout France and a large body of educational writings. The educational movement that he began continues to be shaped by his life, his writings, and his inspirational presence.

Are there Brothers who become priests?

Early on, De La Salle and the Brothers decided that they would best serve their mission by concentrating entirely on the ministry of teaching. The only priest in the order was him. Today, the Brothers remain the largest group of lay religious men in the Church devoted exclusively to education.

Those who are called to priestly ministry, along with teaching, will find very good religious orders that do so. The Brothers bring the Gospel to the educational world with singleness of devotion and purpose, solely through teaching ministry.

Some quotations from the writings of De La Salle

- “Be satisfied with what you can do, since this satisfies God, but do not spare yourself in what you can do with the help of grace. Be convinced that, provided you are willing, you can do more with the help of God’s grace than you imagine.”
- “Most Christians regard decorum and civility only as human qualities, and do not realize that these virtues can relate us to God, to our neighbor, and to ourselves.”
- “Generosity is the motive power of all noble actions, and perhaps the germ of all virtues.”
- “The twelve virtues of the good teacher are gravity, silence, humility, prudence, wisdom, patience, reserve, meekness, zeal, vigilance, piety, and generosity.”
- “You too can perform miracles by touching the hearts of the children confided to your care.”

The Patron of Teachers in the Catholic Church

John Baptist de La Salle was canonized as a saint on May 15, 1900, and his statue stands in the middle of nave of St. Peter’s in Rome (right side, top level). Exactly fifty years later, in 1950, Pope Pius XII declared him to be the “Special Patron of All Teachers of Youth” in the Catholic Church. Today, throughout the Lasallian world, May 15th is the day when his legacy, his heritage, and his charism are celebrated.