



# Our Lasallian Heritage

## With Creativity and Fortitude through Innovation

What is often forgotten in many discussions about De La Salle is the tremendous amount of **creativity** he applied to turning his educational vision into a reality. Hand in hand with that creativity went a **fortitude**, a courage, that moved his work forward in bold strokes. It was through daring, persistent **innovation** that De La Salle and the Brothers succeeded where so many others had failed. Numerous examples from the early history of the Institute illustrate the point.

This "life theme" in De La Salle became established when he gave up his inheritance and his honored position at the Cathedral of Reims in order to throw his lot in with the would-be schoolmasters. During the famine of 1683-84, De La Salle **distributed his fortune** (over \$400,000) as bread for the poor and resigned his lucrative position at the Cathedral. This move demonstrated both his solidarity with his followers and his radical dependence on God's providential care. Instead of endowing the schools—an obvious move to his followers—he went much deeper. To his young followers, his commitment to this new enterprise must have been quite an example. They could hardly complain that we wasn't walking the talk.

### Reflection Questions

- 1) How is our ministry or institutions creative and bold in its policies and practices?
- 2) Where might innovation and prudent, faith-inspired daring make a difference for us?



In the same vein, some years later when Brothers were literally dying from overwork, others were leaving after having been trained as teachers, and various pastors or bishops were trying to take control of their future, De La Salle made a couple of creative, bold moves. He took a private **"heroic vow"** with two other Brothers to ensure that the enterprise would become established "even if we have to live on bread alone." He **found a large house** in the country where his followers could be trained and could come on retreat or to relax. And he called everyone together for an **extensive retreat**, rekindling the fire of their commitment and instituting a system of **monthly correspondence** so that he might continue to build us their strength and guide their spiritual lives.

In the schools, this same creativity and fortitude operated. The *Conduct*, a **handbook for schools** that De La Salle and the Brothers created, includes innovative methods for teaching French, reading, handwriting, mathematics, and religion. De La Salle's first book for the

schools was *Teaching French Syllables* which, in effect, eventually **standardized French pronunciation** throughout the country. A book from which students learned to read was a **politeness book**, written in the kind of script they would encounter in the job market, so that their manners would improve along with their reading skills. Religious education included the singing of **popular tunes** of the day, but with lyrics based on the catechism lessons, and several books concerning one's behavior in Church were written. A **personalized record** was kept for each student which talked about his strengths and weaknesses, his family relationships, and the approaches that worked best. This record was passed on to other teachers so that they could work with that student more effectively. On every level, the **student was the central concern**; new teaching methods or resources were devised and implemented for the sake of the student.

During De La Salle's lifetime, almost sixty schools were established all over France. Of these, not more than 30+ were still in existence at the time of his death. 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 was based on the conviction that God works through us and through our creativity. When we are creative in responding to what we know needs to be done, and as we act on that creativity with conviction and fortitude, **we share in God's life** in our midst and make St. John Baptist De La Salle's attitude our own.

## Consequences for taking creativity & fortitude seriously:

To Introduce – *Explicit*: include one yearly unprecedented, creative, well-prepared program for the school.  
*Implicit*: budget funds for student-led or faculty-led creative or challenging educational projects.

To Foster – *Explicit*: establish clear, fair, innovative and timely school procedures for both students and faculty / staff. *Implicit*: brainstorm solutions at faculty meetings concerning persistent situations.

To Enhance – *Explicit*: encourage qualified teachers to try out new educational programs or teaching methods. *Implicit*: foster alternative student education ventures (field trips, enhancement weeks, and so on).



La Salle was an innovator in response, not to an intuition, but to the requests and needs of others. Ramification in the work of the Brothers did not come from innate charisma but from sensitivity and openness to the educational needs of the population around them.

– Alfred Calcutt (*De La Salle*, p. 423)

That "unruffled boldness" of the Founder's can be explained in the last analysis, only by the spiritual quality and the genuine holiness of his life, for his only ambition was at all times and despite all obstacles to adhere, in view of faith, to God's will clearly known, and to the designs of Providence.

– André Rayez (*Lasallian Studies*, p.4)

There is a need for both individual and community effort, based on creative study, to discover new and adapted forms of education to meet the needs of those among the poor who are most neglected.

– *Declaration*, 33.1

It is of the utmost importance that from the center to every part of the Institute there be a bold and generous response to the immense suffering of people in the world today.

– *Declaration*, 33.4

Today, with their Partners, the Brothers wish to respond in a creative way to the educational and spiritual needs of young people, especially of those who are the most vulnerable.

– *Rule*, Art. 153

The life of our Institute, along with the updating of its mission, constitute a never-ending series of creative acts inspired by fidelity, which at times, call for difficult commitments, as John Baptist de La Salle himself experienced.

– *Rule*, Art. 160

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*De La Salle*

[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  
(*Meditations* 33.3)

[O]ne of the main concerns of those who instruct others: to be able to understand their students and to discern the right way to guide them. . . This guidance requires understanding and discernment of spirit. (*Meditations*, 33.1)

It is surprising that most Christians look upon decorum and politeness as merely human and worldly qualities and do not think of raising their minds to any higher views by considering them as virtues that have reference to God, to their neighbor, and to themselves. . . Children should do these things out of respect for God in whose presence they are. . . to show others those signs of consideration, honor, and respect appropriate to members of Jesus Christ and living temples of God, enlivened by the Holy Spirit. (*Politeness*, Preface)

