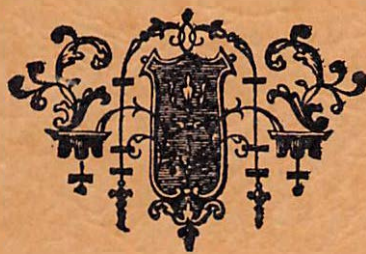


THE LIFE
OF
JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE

FOUNDER OF THE BROTHERS OF THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS



by

CANON JOHN BAPTIST BLAIN

Translated by

Brother Richard Arandez, FSC

THE LIFE OF JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE
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at Rouen

Published by John Baptist Machuel

Rue Damiette

1733

With the approbation and the authorization of the King

De La Salle House

We thought it would be of interest to the readers of the English translation of Volume 1, Book 1 of Canon Blain's life of our Founder to see a few of the original pages from the work. So, we are presenting here: (1) the title page; (2) the picture of our Founder that appears opposite page 117 of Blain's work; (3) another of the pages from the original text.

As was the custom apparently in those days, the table of contents appears at the end of the book. This translation follows that procedure, too.



LE PORTRAIT DE M.^{RE} JEAN BAPTISTE DE LA SALLE
Prêtre, Docteur, en Théologie, et Instituteur, des Freres des Ecoles Chrétiennes.

L. de la Vallée

J. P. Sotin sculpt.



L A V I E
 DE MONSIEUR
 JEAN-BAPTISTE
 DE LA SALLE,
 INSTITUTEUR
 DES FRERES DES ECOLES
 CHRETIENNES.



L I V R E P R E M I E R.

Où Monsieur DE LA SALLE est représenté aux Enfants & aux jeunes Gens, comme un Modèle des Vertus de leur âge ; aux Clercs, comme un Miroir de l'Esprit Ecclésiastique ; aux Prêtres, comme une Image de la Sainteté Sacerdotale.

L'innocence & la pureté des mœurs de son premier âge & de sa jeunesse : Enfant Chrétien, Ecolier pieux, Clerc fervent, Prêtre zélé ; il est un Modèle de Vertu dans tous ces âges & dans tous ces états différens.

C H A P I T R E P R E M I E R.

Sa Naissance, son Enfance & son Education.



REIMS en Champagne, Ville autrefois si féconde en Saints & en grands Hommes, a eu la gloire de donner dans ces derniers tems naissance à Monsieur DE LA SALLE. Son pere, d'une famille des plus distinguées, y remplissoit avec lumiere & avec probité la Charge de Conseiller au Présidial ; Madame sa mere issuë de la famille de Broüillet, encore plus recommandable par sa piété que par sa Noblesse, avoit soin de cultiver dans une édifiante

^{1.}
sa naissance

Retraite, des vertus qui craignent le grand monde, & qui n'y sont jamais sans danger. Celui dont nous écrivons la vie fut l'aîné de sept enfans, dont leur mariage fut beni. Dieu en eut la meilleure part; car de cinq garçons & deux filles, dont cette pieuse famille étoit composée, quatre se consacrerent au service de Dieu. Une des filles se renferma dans le Monastère de Saint Etienne-les-Dames; un des garçons prit parti parmi les Chanoines Réguliers de sainte Geneviève, & devint Prieur; les deux autres se dévoüerent à l'Eglise, & prirent rang parmi les Prêtres du Seigneur, & parmi les Chanoines de l'illustre Eglise Métropolitaine de Reims. Un de ceux-là fut Monsieur De La Salle. Il nâquit le 30. Avril 1651. & il fut le même jour régénéré dans les Eaux du Batême; tenu sur les Fonds sacrez par Monsieur Jean Moët de Broüillet son Aïeul maternel, & par Madame Perrette L'espagnol son Epouse, qui lui donnerent le nom de JEAN-BAPTISTE, par un heureux présage qui sembloit promettre que cet enfant seroit dans le dix-septième siècle un grand modèle d'innocence & de penitence.

11. Ses inclina-
rions. Son
enfant. cc.
Tobie 1. 4.

Dès le berceau il parut que la grace le distinguoit, & qu'elle en vouloit faire un de ses chef-d'œuvres. Rien de puérile en lui. Enfant, sans avoir les inclinations des enfans; il aimoit les exercices sérieux, & il ne faisoit rien paroître dans toutes ses actions, qui tint de ce premier âge. Ses amusemens, s'il en eut, furent des essais de vertu; & la piété, qui est en nous le fruit lent & tardif de la grace, prévint en lui la raison. Dévot sans grimace, il se plaisoit à la priere & à la lecture des bons Livres; & son penchant pour l'état Ecclesiastique se remarquoit déjà dans ses divertissemens même: car son plaisir étoit d'élever des Chapelles, de parer des Autels, de chanter les Cantiques de l'Eglise & d'imiter les Cérémonies de la Religion. Les autres passe-tems n'étoient point de son goût; & quoiqu'il fût né gai & de belle humeur, son inclination ne le portoit point aux divertissemens de ceux de son âge. Pour lui fournir des plaisirs, il falloit lui présenter des objets de piété qui eussent raport à Dieu & à son Eglise. Il le fit bien paroître un jour, que dans la maison de son Pere tout étoit en joye & en divertissemens, car bien loin d'y prendre part, son cœur s'y trouva si fermé, que pour sortir de l'ennui qui l'accabloit, il alla se jeter entre les bras d'une personne de la Compagnie, & la pria de lui lire la Vie des Saints, en lui témoignant le dégoût qu'il ressentoit des plaisirs dont il étoit spectateur.

L'Eglise étoit dès-lors comme son centre unique; il falloit l'y mener, pour lui faire plaisir; ses joies étoient là, & nulle part ailleurs. Ceux-là étoient ses amis, qui lui prétoient une main bien-faisante pour l'y conduire. Quand il en scût le chemin, & que l'âge lui permit de le faire, la permission d'y aller étoit la grande grace qu'il demandoit, & l'unique conforme à ses inclinations, qu'on pût lui accorder. Pour le faire plus souvent, il se déroboit à ses camarades, se refusoit à leurs jeux & à leurs amusemens; & fuyant seul la compagnie de tous
Tobie 1. 5.

les autres, *il alloit au Temple du Seigneur, adorer le Seigneur Dieu d'Israël.* Plein de respect & de révérence pour le lieu Saint, il y portoit déjà cet air de recueillement & de Religion, qui le rendirent lui-même dans la suite si auguste & si respectable au pied des Autels. Comme ce n'étoit ni la légèreté ni la curiosité qui l'attiroient à l'Eglise, il n'y étoit occupé que de Dieu & de la Priere: sa modestie qui animoit sa jeunesse, & qui donnoit un nouvel éclat à sa beauté naturelle, attiroient sur lui tous les yeux. Il paroissoit un petit Saint à ceux qui l'envifageoient dans ces momens; & il inspiroit de la dévotion à ceux qui en avoient le moins. Les Assistans si agréablement surpris & édifiez de voir tant de piété

FOREWORD

Not long after the death of St. John Baptist de La Salle in 1719, three biographies of our Founder were written. Brother Bernard was the author of the first. Only a part of his work remains in manuscript form. The second biography was written by Dom Elie Maillefer, a nephew of St. La Salle.

The first biography of our Founder to be printed was written by Canon John Baptist Blain, at one time ecclesiastical superior of the Brothers in the diocese of Rouen. Brother Timothy, superior general of the Brothers, commissioned this biography. It appeared in 1733 in two volumes. Despite the anonymity the author wanted, Blain is certainly the writer.

A close friend of De La Salle, Blain was named spiritual director of the Brothers when St. La Salle left St. Yon to visit the schools in the south of France and to establish a novitiate at Marseilles. Blain spent some 13 years in writing the life of St. La Salle, from 1719 to 1732. Blain's death came in 1751.

The first volume of Blain's work on St. La Salle contains the life story of our Founder. Actually this first volume is divided into three parts. The first part gives an account of the Brothers and Sisters of the Christian and gratuitous schools. As Blain says, this opening section shows the importance of and the need for these schools as well as the objections raised by their opponents. Blain devotes over 100 pages in this first part before he gets to the life of De La Salle.

It is only on page 117 of the original work that Blain finally starts his work on the life of the Founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. This section is called Book One. It is approximately 100 pages in length and covers the events in De La Salle's life from his birth to the distribution of his wealth to the poor.

Only Book One of Volume One appears here in our English translation. It will soon be followed by the translation of Volume One, Book Two--a rather lengthy treatment of St. La Salle's work in establishing a new religious family of teachers in the Church.

Volume Two portrays St. La Salle as very zealous for the Christian education of the poor. It also dwells on our Founder's spirit and virtues. In addition it contains a short life of Brother Bartholomew, our first superior general after De La Salle; some brief accounts of a few of the first Brothers, and a listing of events not covered in Volume One.

Blain's work is important. For some 150 years, it was the only source for biographies of our Founder. The modern reader will undoubtedly find Blain to be an author who rambles, whose style is often wearisome. However, it should be remembered that Blain was a contemporary of our Founder, that he was able to speak with many of the first Brothers, that Brother Timothy made available to him many of the early documents of our Institute. In spite of any shortcomings the book may have, Blain is rich in detail. His work is a veritable gold mine for students of De La Salle, his times, and his work.

Volume One, Book One, which is presented here, was translated by Brother Richard Arnandez, FSC, of De La Salle, Lafayette, LA. Brother Richard is a former provincial of our New Orleans-Santa Fe district and, for many years, was stationed at our motherhouse in Rome. We are grateful to him for his excellent and painstaking work. Brother Richard has already completed the translation of Volume One, Book Two as well as the entire Volume Two. In due time we hope to be able to present these translations to the Brothers.

A word of thanks, too, to Brother Edward MacDougald, FSC, of Christian Brothers Center, Narragansett, RI, who translated the dedication letter which Blain piously addressed to the Most Holy Infant Jesus, asking His blessing upon his work; to Brother Richard Rush, FSC, of Montini High School, Lombard, IL, for his careful reading of the English translation and valuable suggestions; to Brother Patrick Walsh, FSC, of De La Salle Hall, Romeoville, IL, for his help in proofreading; to Bill Brown and Jack Laak of St. Mary's Press, Winona, MN, for their professional advice; to Mrs. Carol Hamm for typing the manuscript. Above all, a special expression of gratitude to our former superior general, Brother Charles Henry, FSC, of our Long Island-New England district, who initiated the entire Lasallian publication project before becoming seriously ill.

Brother Hilary C. Gilmartin, FSC
Editor, Lasallian Publications
Christian Brothers National Office
Romeoville, IL, 60441

February 27, 1982--Feast of St. Gabriel of the Sorrowful Mother,
former student of our Brothers in Italy

D E D I C A T I O N

Before Your feet, Infant Jesus, we bring this work, as a tribute which belongs by every right to Your Divine Majesty. The desire to procure Your glory and to enlighten the children of Your holy Church has inspired me to undertake it, and the desire that You honor it with Your protection and favor it with the abundance of Your blessings has instilled in me the courage to dedicate it to You.

Since none other but You has taken in hand the interests of the work which is the subject of this book, You are the only one to Whom its dedication properly belongs. A work which has had only You for protector should look for no other protection. You alone have sufficed for it; You alone will truly know how to defend it against all the powers of earth and of hell, as You have done up to the present, when the children, like their Father, will learn to have complete confidence in Your infinite goodness.

Why should they court the favor of some great person, in putting his name at the head of this work? Do they not know, through the light of faith, that the arm of the most renowned and most powerful man is only a fragile reed which cannot sustain them, and which allows those to fall who take it for their support? Do they not know, through the history of their Institute and of their Founder, that the work which is of God cannot be destroyed by men, and that in vain do the nations tremble with rage against it and plot its destruction? Do they not know that cursed is the one who takes the arm of man for his support and who puts his confidence in creatures?

O Child of Bethlehem, so humble and so majestic! So powerless in the stable and so powerful in heaven! Before Your adorable majesty, who are the greatest of the earth? Who could harm those whom You protect, or defend those whom You abandon?

In Your presence, O Prince of Eternity, who sustains the earth and who governs the universe while You are carried in the arms of the Virgin, Your Mother; in Your presence, what are the powers of the world? They are but nothing, a drop of dew, a dunghill, as You Yourself have taught us in Scripture.

Since all greatness is eclipsed by Yours, since every power loses its name and is but weakness in Your eyes, since every creature is Your work, our whole interest is to forget what is not You, and to reserve for You our entire homage. Since every created being bows before Your sovereignty, confessing its nothingness and its dependence, as it will be obliged to do on the last day, when You will come again in the glory of Your Majesty to judge all men, wisdom inspires us to think only of pleasing You, and to seek to assure ourselves a place in Your kingdom.

Moreover, man has had so little part in the birth, the development and the formation of the Institute whose history we give that it would be an injustice capable of drawing Your indignation to give him credit for it. In fact, how many times have we seen its enemies, animated with the spirit of Herod, who took such measures to bring about Your death in the arms of the Virgin, Your Mother, O Divine Messiah, the Desired of Nations, seek to smother in its cradle this work which, as a source of grace, had begun to develop for the good of the Church! How many times had its holy Founder been obliged, after Your example, Divine Child, King of the World to Come, to flee into an alien land in order to escape the fury of his persecutors! How many times did he see his work, as a fragile boat, exposed to the fury of the winds of persecution, close to being swamped or to shipwreck, without any pilot to conduct it other than the one Your Divine Providence had provided!

How many times have we seen that edifice, scarcely begun, shaken to its foundations and threatened with ruin, supported and reaffirmed by another arm than that of Him Who shakes the pillars of heaven!

O Child Whom I adore as my God, in what corner of France could the Architect whom You had entrusted with the building of this edifice hide himself where he had not found the cross?

It is astonishing that while everyone acknowledged the excellence and the necessity of this Institute, and the inestimable good that it could provide for the Church, everyone sought its destruction. While the Institute was praised on all sides, the Founder was rejected, snubbed, calumniated, persecuted, pursued and, above all, betrayed from within and without, by his own children as well as by outsiders; so universally that, like You Yourself, his Divine Master, no one dared to stand with him, no one dared to open his mouth to take his defense.

Where is the place where the stone has not been thrown at him, as well as at his disciples? Where is the city where he and his followers have not endured insults, humiliations, interference and injustice? Above all, in the words of the Apostle, where were they not "treated as the offal of the world, still to this day, the scum of the earth" (1 Cor. 4:13)? Regarded as the least of men, treated as evildoers, they saw their services refused, or they were paid only with outrage and with the refusal of things necessary for life; in such a way that they remained objects of charity, a prey to work, to calamity, to endless labor, to hunger and thirst, to fasting, to cold and nakedness. "I have worked and labored, often without sleep; I have been hungry and thirsty and often starving; I have been in the cold without clothes" (2 Cor. 11:27). Above all, mockery and public insult were their lot. Blows often followed insults, and the prejudiced populace took malicious pleasure in casting mud at them and striking them. "They experienced mockery and blows" (Heb 11:36f).

Scarcely could they appear on the streets but malicious hands took up stones to cast at them. "They were stoned." With what sort of opprobrium was their virtue not tested in the very places where they had gone to present gratuitous and charitable services to the most miserable and abandoned youth? "They were tempted." Poor, lacking everything, friendless, they went out from every side, O Savior of the World, to enrich with the treasures of Christian doctrine children who bore the name of Christian with scarcely any comprehension of this glorious name. "However, they enriched many."

Never in plenty, always in want, in tribulation, in affliction, they were seen, after Your example and that of Your Apostles, to sow their instruction with tears in soil where they could expect to reap only thorns. Nearly a hundred of them, both before and after their Patriarch, have already died on the cross. They received in this world no other recompense, O Divine Child, than the honor of resembling You, and of being associated with You in suffering.

If the world rejected them, we must not be astonished. It had rejected You when You were hidden in the womb of Your Mother, and obliged You to begin Your entry into this world on the straw of a manger. "And his own received him not" (Jn. 1:11). Though renowned for miracles in the course of Your life, it failed to recognize You. "The world did not know him" (Jn. 1:10). Finally, when Your infinite love prepared to pay the price of its salvation, it had condemned You to death. "They all shouted, 'Crucify him! Crucify him!'" (Mk. 15:13).

Accordingly, it is in acknowledgment, it is in justice, it is of necessity, most holy Infant Jesus, that a work which manifests only You as the author, the defender and the protector of the Institute of the Christian Schools should be dedicated to You. Those who were its first members, of whom several still live (1733), proclaim with unanimous voice that, the hand of man having contributed nothing toward their establishment, dedicating their history to some earthly power would render them guilty of ingratitude and infidelity toward Your Divine Providence.

Moreover, everything leads us to refuse to all others but You this dedication, since it is under Your protection, Holy Child, that the Founder has placed his Institute, the Charitable Schools, the children who come to them, and the masters who teach them.

This holy man, inspired by Your spirit, who experienced opposition from nearly everyone, was so absolutely abandoned to the care of Your kind Providence that he never desired or sought the protection of a single man of influence. Knowing well, through the light of faith, that in vain does man work to build the edifice of which You are not the cornerstone, that in vain does man seek security for the place You do not protect; that, on the contrary, earth and hell tremble powerless with rage, and conspire in vain against that work which Your spirit inspires, he sought to have only You as protector.

So it would be contrary to his spirit, a betrayal of the nobility of his sensitivity, to dedicate to anyone but You, O Child Jesus, a work which proclaims on every page that You are the author, the protector and the defender.

In the same spirit of justice and of fidelity, O loving Child, our King, the Brothers dedicated their first church to You with that inscription which indicates that You alone have founded it: FUNDAVIT EAM ALTISSIMUS.

In truth, if it is astonishing that so much labor, accomplished at such great cost and expense, begins to render illustrious the house of Saint-Yon, formerly poor and humble, in accord with the prediction made by De La Salle on his deathbed, without a single patron, without even a charitable hand having contributed to it, it would be even more astonishing if You, Divine Child Jesus, Who alone had founded, established and erected it, had not been given the honor for its foundation.

I know that several influential people have assisted the Institute, whether to deliver it from oppression or from some unjust vexation, or to obtain the payment of pensions due to them; again, to seek Letters Patent from our most Christian King, or, in the Court of Rome, a Bull of Approbation. But how has it been accomplished? I would say practically through the inspiration of heaven. It is certain that they have acted as instruments of Your Providence, or through the movement of that piety which You had given them. There was not one who sought to be declared its protector. That honor is Yours alone, O King of Nations, most holy Child of Bethlehem, Who holds in Your hands the hearts of the great and Who, when it pleases You, knows how to make use of their hands or their tongues, of their piety or of their authority, to bring about the execution of Your designs.

It is to pay You homage, O holy Child our God, that, prostrate at Your feet, we acknowledge You as the sole author of the work whose history we give with the life of its Founder, who has been only Your instrument. In accord with this avowal, and to testify that the work of which it speaks is Your work, we place at the head of this history the inscription which the Brothers placed at the entrance of their church:

FUNDAVIT EAM ALTISSIMUS.

In addition, O Majesty hidden in the form of a child, I can only plead with tears and a contrite heart, that You do not consider the unworthiness of the hand which has written this history; and, not heeding the sins of the author, that You bestow the abundance of Your blessings on a work which is Yours by every right, and which has been realized by the toil, the tears and the blood of him whom You have chosen to be the Founder.

We beseech You, through the poverty of Your stable, through the first blood shed for our salvation in the humiliating and cruel operation of the Circumcision, through the tears and infant cries of Your birth, through the sacrifice of Your life offered in the Temple on the day of Your Presentation, through Your flight into Egypt and return to Nazareth, through the suffering,

the innocence, the sanctity, the virtues and the merits of Your holy Infancy, and finally through the womb which bore You and the virginal breasts which nourished You, to preserve the Institute in the spirit of its Founder, and those who have embraced it in the fervor, the regularity, the humility, the obedience, the mortification, in a word, in the practice of all the virtues of which their Father has given them such heroic examples. We beseech You to place under Your protection all the Christian Schools, all the children who fill them, and all the Masters who govern them.

O Infant God, gentle friend of children, Who during Your mortal life honored them with Your sacred embrace, Who gave them complete freedom to come to You, Who showed them marks of the most profound and sensible love, deign to grant them now an aptitude for their instruction, a perfect docility for being led, an ardent desire to learn the Christian doctrine, and a happy disposition to receive the seeds of virtue.

Deign to inspire in their parents a great zeal for the education of their children, a holy eagerness to send them to the Christian Schools, and a pious vigilance over their conduct, in order that their domestic example might not stifle the shoots of virtue and the seeds of the graces they receive at such a tender age through the work of the Brothers.

To the Brothers, in turn, deign to communicate a deep spirit of piety, of charity, of zeal, of vigilance, of gentleness, of patience, which they need in a work which is so necessary, but which becomes so painful, so tedious and so discouraging when the grace of their state ceases to animate them.

Deign to inspire an ardent zeal in all pastors to multiply and to sustain the Charitable Schools; in the influential to protect them; in the rich to endow them on every side, since there is no more efficacious means of causing God Your Father to be known, adored, loved and served, nor for drawing from the gates of hell a youth that is poor, long abandoned to ignorance and to the evil education of a dissolute life.

Finally, O Infant Jesus, final judge of my eternal destiny, in dedicating this work to You, written by so unworthy a hand, permit me to ask of You a happy death. Remember, Child of a Virgin Mother, totally pure and immaculate, that the name of JESUS, or of SAVIOR, which You received eight days after Your birth, and the role which You played in giving the first drops of Your blood in the Circumcision, give me the freedom to implore You to forget my iniquities, and to cleanse them in that salutary bath which flowed from Your veins.

That is the one grace I desire in this world, He Who is called the friend of sinners, Who, to seek them out, came down from heaven to the womb of a Virgin, and from the womb of a Virgin to a stable; Who, to redeem them, from the manger ascended a cross, gives me the right to seek so precious a grace. Grant it through Your mercy, through Your great mercy, through the fullness of Your mercy, Child of Mary and Son of the eternal Father, to the one whom You know as your worthless, ungrateful, impure and guilty creature, who adores You as

his sovereign Lord, honors You as his Creator, loves You as his God, desires You as his sovereign Good, fears You as his Judge, and asks pardon and mercy as the greatest of sinners.

PERMISSION OF THE KING

LOUIS, BY THE GRACE OF GOD, KING OF FRANCE AND OF NAVARRE: to our beloved and loyal counselors, to the members of Parliament, to the magistrates of our Court, to the General Council, to the Provost of Paris, Judges, Seneschals, their Lieutenants, and to all of the Officers of Justice, GREETINGS:

Our beloved.....has indicated to us that he wishes to publish and make available to the public the Life of John Baptist De La Salle, Priest, Doctor, and Canon of the Cathedral of Rheims, Founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. He asks us, if we find it agreeable, to grant him the necessary permission to do so. He promises to have it printed on good paper and with good type and has submitted a sample which is attached to this document.

For these reasons and wishing to deal favorably with the above mentioned author, we have permitted him to have the said book published in one or in several volumes, together or separately, and as often as he deems proper on paper and in type exactly the same as the sample provided and hereto attached, and to sell, have sold, and distributed said book throughout our entire Kingdom for a period of six consecutive years, beginning with the date affixed below.

We forbid anyone to tamper with this authorization: we forbid likewise all printers of books and others to print, sell, have sold, or distribute or reproduce this book in whole or in part or to make any extract under any pretext whatsoever nor to make any changes without the express permission of the author or of those who act legally for him, under pain of having their work confiscated and a 1,500-livres fine for each breaker of the law: One-third of the fine will come to Us, one-third to the Hotel-Dieu in Paris, and the remaining third to the author. And all other expenses will be paid by the lawbreaker.

It is to be understood that this authorization will be registered in detail in the Register of the Society of Printers and Book Publishers of Paris within three months from this date; that the printing of this book will be done in Our Kingdom and not elsewhere; that the author will conform to all the rules of printing, notably to that regulation of April 10, 1725, and that before offering the book for sale, the handwritten or printed copy used for the printing of the book will be submitted, in the same condition upon which this approval has been given, into the hands of our very dear and loyal Keeper of the Seals of France, Sir Chauvelin, and that two copies will be submitted to the Public Library, one copy to the library of the Louvre, and one more to the library of our dear and loyal Guardian of the Seals of France, Sir Chauvelin. All of this must be done under penalty of nullifying this authorization.

With regards to the content of these documents, we order and enjoin that the author may enjoy fully and peaceably the fruits of his work without having to endure any trouble or obstacles. We wish that a copy of this authorization, which will be printed either at the beginning or end of the said book be con-

sidered properly legal; that copies gathered by one of our counselors or secretaries be considered as authentic as the original. We order our Bailiff or Sergeant to do everything necessary for the execution of this authorization without seeking any other permission, notwithstanding objections that may be raised by Haro, Norman Charter, or any other Letters. FOR SUCH IS OUR PLEASURE. Given at Versailles, the 27th day of November, in the year of Grace 1732, and of our Reign the 18th.

BY THE KING IN COUNCIL

Signed, SAINSON,

Registered in the eighth Register of the Royal and Syndical Chamber of the Council of Publishers and Printers of Paris, number 452, folio 435, conformable to the Laws of 1723 which forbid in Article 4 all persons no matter who they are, other booksellers and printers, to sell, distribute or advertise any books for sale, even if they claim to be the authors, unless they furnish the Copies prescribed by Article 8 of the same law. Given at Paris, December 10, 1732.

Signed, G. MARTIN, Syndic.

The.....has granted this present permission to Sir John Baptist Machuel, according to arrangements agreed upon mutally.

Registered in the Book of the Society of Book Publishers and Printers of Rouen on January 17, 1733.

Signed, B. LE BRUN, Syndic.

BOOK ONE

Chapter I

His Birth, Childhood, and Education

The city of Rheims in Champagne, the birthplace in the past of so many saints and other great men, was honored in more recent years by the birth there of John Baptist de La Salle. His father, who belonged to a distinguished family, occupied the position of magistrate of the presidial court of the city and fulfilled his duties with probity and prudence. His mother was of the Brouillet family, noted even more for piety than for its noble extraction. She took care to cultivate in a retired and edifying life those virtues which shrink from exposure to the world and run the risk of being compromised in it.

The subject of this biography was the eldest of the seven children with which this marriage was blessed. God took His full share because of the five boys and two girls, four consecrated themselves to His service. One daughter entered the convent of Saint Etienne-les-Dames; one of the sons joined the Canons Regular of Saint Genevieve and eventually became prior of that monastery; two other sons devoted their lives to the Church as diocesan priests and both eventually served as members of the Chapter of Canons of the illustrious Metropolitan Church of Rheims.

One of these latter was John Baptist de La Salle, born on April 30, 1651. He received Baptism that same day, his godparents being Jean Moët de Brouillet and Perrette Lespagnol, his maternal grandfather and grandmother. They gave him the name of John Baptist, a prophetic one which seemed to foretell that this child would give the seventeenth century a striking example of an innocent and penitential life.

From the cradle, grace seemed to have signaled him out and appeared determined to make of him one of its masterpieces. In him nothing childish could be observed. Young as he was, he showed no inclination to what usually appeals to children; he preferred serious occupations, and in all he did he showed few of the preferences so marked in childhood. His amusements, if such they can be called, were directed toward virtue; and piety, which in most of us is a late-maturing fruit of grace, appeared in him even before the use of reason. He was devout without mannerisms; he took pleasure in prayer and in reading good books.

His inclination for the ecclesiastical state appeared early, even in his pastimes. He enjoyed arranging chapels, decorating little altars, singing hymns, and imitating religious ceremonies. Other amusements meant little to him; and although he was born with a cheerful and good-natured disposition, he felt little inclination for the diversions usually preferred by children of his age. To please him one had to present him some pious object or things which had some connection with God and His Church. He showed this attitude very clearly one day when his father's house rang with mirth and festive rejoicing. Instead of taking part in all this, John Baptist experienced nothing but ennui; and to ease the boredom he felt, he approached one of the adults present and asked her to read to him from the lives of the saints, declaring at the same time how little he was interested in the festivities that were going on.

From his earliest years the parish church was, so to speak, his only interest. He enjoyed going there; his delight was there and nowhere else. His dearest friends were those who took him by the hand to lead him thither. Once he knew the way and was old enough to go out by himself, he used to request permission to pay visits to the church as a great favor, the only one that corresponded with his inclinations. To visit the church more often he would steal away from his companions, turning aside from their games and sports; abandoning their company, he would go, all alone, to "visit the Lord's temple and adore the Lord God of Israel"(Tobias 1, 5).

Filled with respect and reverence for this holy place, he already showed that recollected air, that religious attitude which later on made him so distinguished-looking and so venerable when he approached the altar. Since it was neither curiosity nor light-mindedness that drew him to church, he occupied himself there with prayer and the thought of God. His modest appearance, which contrasted with his youthfulness and lent added beauty to his features, drew all eyes to him. All those who observed him at such times thought he looked like a little saint. The sight inspired devotion in those who usually experienced little of it. The other worshipers, so agreeably surprised and edified to see so much piety in such a tender youth, might have said with admiration, "What think you shall this child be, for the hand of the Lord is with him" (Luke 1, 66)?

Everything he saw in church charmed him. He liked all of it. Everything there impressed his mind and heart. He was never tired of seeing what went on; he wanted to learn about everything. His questions concerning all he beheld were pertinent, and he wanted sensible answers. If certain older people brushed his queries aside or delayed their replies, his gentle and gracious manners seemed to insist in such a pleasant way that his elders could scarcely resist them.

Although everything he witnessed in church charmed his heart, it was the celebration of holy Mass that attracted him most strongly and delightfully. This led him to want to learn how to serve Mass. Eager to acquire this proficiency, he was in a hurry to receive the lessons he needed; and once he had learned, he could not wait to put his knowledge into practice, for he was not satisfied with being a mere spectator at Mass. He longed to take part in the sacred ministry. He delighted in serving holy Mass, and it was a painful sacrifice for him to have to miss doing so even for a single day.

To secure what he desired on this score, he applied for admission among the altar boys and fulfilled his duties with such extraordinary grace and fervor that those present were ashamed to see a child show a devotion which surpassed their own. The sentiment of religious awe required of those who approached the sacred mysteries, the grace which is part of the true clerical spirit, was given to him even at this early age to prepare him to acquit himself later on of the tremendous ministry to which he was called with that depth of religious feeling and of piety which faith in God's presence inspires. This respect and reverence always accompanied him when he entered the sacred precincts, and he inspired others with like sentiments.

It was especially in the sanctuary that he seemed filled with this reverential awe. His attitude was so deferential and devout that when he was exercising his priestly functions one might have thought him a seraph in human form. Never did he grow familiar with the altar, even though, once he was ordained, he approached it daily, in order to celebrate the sacred rites. Each day saw his preparation grow more thorough, his faith and his reverence, the sentiment of his own unworthiness, his fervor and love grow more profound.

In him such desirable dispositions were not the slow and gradual result of reading the works of the Fathers, nor of deep reflections on the sanctity of the priesthood, nor of the sublimity of the mysteries accomplished on the altar. They were rather the advance effects of prevenient grace which filled him with respect, reverence, and desire for everything pertaining to the priestly ministry as soon as the maturing of his mind allowed him to acquire a sufficient understanding of these things. When he served at the altar, he already appeared what he would himself be later on when celebrating Mass: an angel, a true cherub. His visage shone with a chaste beauty. Because he shared the purity of the heavenly spirits, he seemed to have been given a reflection of their radiance and beauty as well.

Parents seem to live again in their children. Along with their blood they usually share their own inclinations with those they bring into this world. Since it is natural for children to show the same likes and dislikes as their parents, when the opposite happens everyone finds it rather strange. It was, therefore, surprising that young De La Salle did not in the least inherit his father's fondness for music. He might have been so inclined had grace not inspired him with other likes. Perhaps grace suppressed this tendency in him from birth and turned his taste in a different direction, inspiring him with aversion for and even fear of a pleasure which, while innocent enough in appearance, can offer dangers and sometimes wounds the soul while flattering the ear.

Young De La Salle did not care to store up in his memory songs which it is better to be ignorant of than to know and which it is more appropriate and more difficult to forget than to learn. His was not the kind of character which would allow his sensitive soul to be exposed to the harmful impressions produced by those worldly airs which can only enervate the hearts of those who sing them or listen to them. His preference was for the chants of the Church. Since praising, blessing, and loving God was to be his eternal and unique occupation in heaven, he desired to have no other on this earth; and insofar as it depended on him, he

indeed had no other. From an early age he became very assiduous in attending the Divine Office; and even before he became a canon (which happened early in his life), he had begun, when still hardly more than a child, to follow a canon's schedule.

His father, who was basically a sincere Christian, was pleased to observe these natural dispositions for virtue in his son. Far from trying to oppose them, as worldly fathers sometimes do, he sought to cultivate them with care. Hoping to nourish them and cause them to develop, he often took the boy with him to church. Delighted to be able to satisfy his own religious duties and at the same time to favor his son's religious inclinations, he took pleasure in assisting at the Divine Office with him.

His mother, endowed with an even more tender piety, sought to sow the seeds of virtue in his youthful soul and had the satisfaction of seeing them germinate and grow beyond her fondest expectations. Thus his father and his mother, taking pains to train this young Samuel beneath their very eyes, had the joy of seeing him grow "in grace and in wisdom before God and men," if I may be permitted to apply to him the words that the Gospel uses when speaking of the Child Jesus.

When the time came to start his formal education, he was placed in the hands of tutors capable of instructing him in human learning. After this he was sent to the preparatory school attached to the University of Rheims where he spent the first years of his studies. There he showed himself a model for the other students and a subject of satisfaction for his teachers. His progress in knowledge kept pace with his advancement in virtue, for he always considered it an essential duty to combine the two things and never to separate study from his efforts to acquire piety.

In his case, application to study (as so often happens) did not lead to a diminution in his spirit of devotion, and this latter never interfered with his intellectual efforts. Thus both God and his teachers were pleased with him because he always remained true to himself. Devout without being affected, cheerful without being frivolous or giddy, he made himself agreeable to all and won their affection. Wisdom, docility, and piety were the three guardians of his innocence and the three characteristic traits of his youth. These precious virtues, coupled with his gentle and gracious air, won for him the hearts of his teachers and the esteem and respect of his companions who considered him as their model. He was indeed the paragon of students; we shall see him also as the pattern of youthful clerics.

Chapter II

De La Salle's Entry into the Clerical State; His Reception into the Illustrious Chapter of Canons of the Metropolitan Church of Rheims

Young De La Salle, like a new Samuel, seemed to have been born for the sacred ministry. He was made for the Church. Indeed his greatest ambition was

to consecrate himself to her service. His vocation appeared evident in all his actions, inclinations, pastimes and interests. Everything about him proclaimed that he was destined for the service of the altar. Even his childish amusements pointed the same way. As he grew older, this call became more and more imperious. With time it sounded so strong and clear that he felt he would have been resisting God's voice had he delayed any longer in asking for the tonsure. He counted on his parents' piety not to raise any objections to this, and in fact they did not. His vocation was written on his brow, so to speak, and had been from the cradle. It had become so obvious in all his behavior that to oppose it would have been to defy the will of heaven.

If God had allowed his parents to choose the holocaust which they were called upon to offer Him, they would no doubt have selected another of their children and would have kept the eldest, who is usually the most dearly beloved child, as being the first fruit of their conjugal love. But they did not heed the voice of nature. Grace claimed her full rights and decreed that the most worthy one would be dedicated to God. Nothing could have been more right and proper.

What joy filled John Baptist's heart when he saw himself free to follow his desires which, ever since he could remember, had urged him to devote himself entirely to God! What happiness was his when he realized that he could enter a state which would enroll him officially in the service of the Church and make of him a man of God! Only souls like his whom God leads by the hand, as it were, from their earliest years on the path of greater perfection, can understand and explain what he felt.

His tonsure was no empty ceremony, no merely apparent renunciation of the world, no mere formality of consecration to God, as it is for so many others. His mouth uttered what his heart dictated when he said that he took God for his portion forever and that he desired no other inheritance. "God became the God of his heart," as the Prophet says, the center of his affections, the sole object of his desires. Before long we shall see him fulfill this promise to the letter by separating himself entirely and solemnly from the world, by giving away all his possessions and becoming poor himself, by resigning his canonry. But let us not anticipate; let us rather follow the story of his years which corresponds with the history of grace.

Having become a cleric, John Baptist seemed to be an entirely different person. His piety, modesty and innocence of life seemed to acquire new luster once he donned the surplice and was enrolled in the service of the altar. Among the other young clerics, as among his schoolmates, he stood out as an inspiring model. He was a bright torch which the bishop had lighted and placed on a lampstand to give light to the church of Rheims and eventually to the whole of France.

The young cleric, seeing himself now as a man of God, or at least under the obligation of becoming such, was resolved not to bear this title in vain. He exerted himself to deserve it. His renewed zeal for his clerical functions, his stronger attraction to the service of the altar, his more constant love for

prayer, his edifying assiduity to the Divine Office, all these proved that he had indeed "laid aside the old man and put on the new, clothed in justice and holiness," and that these sacred words, which the ordaining prelate had addressed to him while giving him the tonsure and clothing him with the surplice, had proved truly effective and had found fulfillment in him through the working of the Holy Spirit. His delight in singing God's praises grew daily; and God provided him with an opportunity of satisfying this inclination as fully as possible and of performing as a duty what he had previously carried out through the inspiration of grace.

On July 9, 1666, when he was fifteen years old, he received a canonry in the Metropolitan Church of Rheims through the resignation of Pierre Dozet, archdeacon of Champagne and chancellor of the university. He took possession of his canonry the following year on January 17. His own grandfather, a man of rare piety who had taken upon himself the obligation of reciting the Divine Office daily, insisted on being his instructor and took great pleasure in teaching him how to recite the Office.

Thus John Baptist was now in an important position, on his own, so to speak, at an age when young people only too frequently begin to use their liberty to the detriment of their souls. Born with an inexhaustible fund of pride in himself, man craves independence with all his might. Unceasingly, the young strive to throw off the yoke of their teachers, for they cannot endure either constraint or restrictions. To be their own masters, to be able to do what they want, to follow their own ideas, to act as they see fit, to give in to their inclinations and lend themselves to those of others--such are the natural desires of their hearts.

Even those who profess a certain piety are more than willing to make it conform to their own lights and often combine it with their natural likings, innocent as these may be. We like to discover for ourselves the path we hope to follow on the road to heaven. We take pleasure in going only where we choose and in the manner we choose. This temptation is a subtle one; it is easy for a young man who is just beginning to breathe the intoxicating air of liberty to fall a victim to it. When young people throw off the yoke of parental authority, they not infrequently reject at the same time the restraints of virtue and duty. Piety is often shipwrecked on this reef because it has not had time to grow robust.

Seeing himself a canon, John Baptist might have thought himself emancipated, independent, master of himself and subject to no other rules than those which he might impose on himself. This is a false notion that many a young cleric might entertain regarding a canon's prebend, a dangerous privilege that many think accompanies the canon's robes and which they feel they have a right to enjoy when they don the insignia. They feel no obligation of any kind; if they do assume some obligations, it is in an arbitrary manner. They tailor them according to their own whims or according to the example of their fellow canons. In this state of life, if a man does labor for the Church he looks upon this as something optional for which he takes full credit and claims high merit. If he does some service to his neighbor or labors for the salvation of souls, he devotes himself to such work in proportion to his zeal but without making it in

any sense obligatory and without applying to himself what Saint Paul said: "Woe is me if I preach not the Gospel!" If such a one prefers to do nothing and lets himself stagnate in ease and idleness, he still imagines that he has fulfilled all his duties and that neither God nor man has anything to reproach him with so long as he has assiduously attended Divine Office according to the regulations of the Chapter.

Still, every age and every state of life has its own special virtues just as it has its special temptations. Modesty, piety, assiduity to the Divine Office, regularity, study and a love of work are all virtues which eminently become young canons and which one cannot too earnestly wish them to possess. Immodesty in church, lack of decorum, undignified manners, idleness, laziness-- these are vices which they need to be on guard against more than do other clerics. To avoid succumbing to these failings they must constantly take precautions not to follow the bad example which they may encounter.

Young De La Salle observed with attention those of his fellows who were capable of edifying him and of inspiring him with true devotion. He closed his eyes to those whose frivolous manners and lack of modesty might have exerted an evil influence on his own conduct. He profited by the good example he met and ignored the bad. Recollected and serious, he centered all his thoughts on the One Whom he had come to praise and glorify. Sharing in the role of the angels, he emulated their modesty, reverence and piety. His state of life consecrated him to the public prayer of the Church; consequently he strove to practice the virtues that his state requires: separation from the world, retirement, recollection, the cultivation of the interior life. Still, his studies did not suffer because of his new duties. He knew that a canonry, far from being a dispensation from further study, was on the contrary a powerful motive to study all the more.

This obligation springs from the rank which canons occupy among the clergy, from the intentions of the Church herself, and from the practice of the saintliest bishops. If the canons of the Cathedral hold first rank in honor among the diocesan clergy, is it not right that they should also hold first place in learning and that they should be leaders not only because of their dignity but also because of their intellectual accomplishments? Such is certainly the mind of the Church, since she considers canons the top-ranking members of the diocesan clergy, the senate, as it were, the bishop's official counselors. How can they carry out such honorable duties unless they possess uncommon learning?

For this reason the Council of Trent urged that at least two-thirds of the members of Cathedral Chapters should be men holding doctorate degrees. Saint Charles, for instance, appointed none but Doctors in Theology to his Cathedral Chapter; and insofar as they were able, the most illustrious bishops followed his example in this. Only the learned should occupy the first place in a diocese, since only they are capable of rendering it truly outstanding services, of helping by their wise advice the prelates who so often are overburdened with thorny problems and who must decide such very difficult cases.

De La Salle, then, went along with the spirit and intentions of the Church

and pursued his studies with renewed ardor. In fact, he needed learning more than many others since Divine Providence destined him to be the founder of a new congregation of men devoted to the instruction of the young and to the teaching of Christian doctrine.

Having completed his course in philosophy, he took, as was the custom, the degree of Master of Arts. This first step towards the Doctorate (still a long way off) made him think of going to the University of Paris, that well-spring of true doctrine, in order to complete his degree in theology. Once he had made up his mind to study at the Sorbonne and to obtain there his Licentiate and the Doctor's cap, the question remained where he should live in order to succeed in the two-fold goal he had set himself: to become a saint and to become a learned theologian.

As we all know, while study should help one to acquire virtue and piety, it is often the greatest enemy, the most dangerous obstacle to progress in virtue. Self-love, which is so inclined to twist everything to its own advantage, is marvelously adept at using a passionate interest in study as a means of extinguishing fervor. Where could John Baptist find a residence where the one would not cause prejudice to the other, where a great determination to acquire knowledge would be combined with an even greater concern for acquiring virtue? Where could he find a suitable dwelling for young clerics, a school that had produced savants as well as saints, an academy where both piety and sound doctrine flourished? Such was the sort of place that the young canon was looking for and that his virtuous parents wanted for him.

It did not take them long to find one. The Seminary of Saint Sulpice, distinguished by all these traits, could hardly have been unknown to them. Consequently, that was where he was sent; and never was there a house of studies where he felt more at home. There he found the very fountainhead of the ecclesiastical spirit, a school of pure virtue, where outstanding directors taught their disciples how to hasten after them on the path to perfection and did so more by their example than by their exhortations. There indeed he found himself where he had longed to be.

At this time Louis Tronson headed the group of holy and learned priests who conducted the seminary. This admirable man, considered one of the oracles of the clergy of his day, possessed deep erudition along with rare and surprising insight. To these he had succeeded in joining a depth of humility and simplicity which was even more edifying. His external manner of living, which was very modest, cloaked a profound interior life and an extremely mortified existence. Always detached from his own interests and united with God, he displayed nothing of his merely human traits to those who in great numbers came to consult him. Like an angel, knowing no passions, avoiding any natural reactions, always perfectly calm, he found in his heavenly inspired wisdom the solution to the thorniest difficulties and such wise counsels that they seemed dictated by the Holy Spirit.

How many remarkable men throughout France, trained under this worthy superior, have given him an outstanding reputation through their conduct and the saintly lives they have led! Bishops, too, and others occupying the highest

positions in the Church, after having been his disciples and his spiritual children, considered it a duty to honor him like a father and to follow his advice like that of an oracle. Such was the superior of the Seminary of Saint Sulpice when the young canon of Rheims entered it. God was leading him into paths which at the moment he had no idea of but which would bring him to accomplish the eternal designs of Providence by means as effective as they were simple. In his new residence God allowed him to meet the greatest masters of the two-fold science he had come to seek. He found there the most powerful means of achieving his purpose and the most striking examples to encourage him in his pursuit with the greatest ardor. God gave him other Angel Raphaels to lead him by the hand to the heights of perfection.

The man whom Divine Providence had chosen to be his spiritual father was a real saint of the first rank, a seraph in a mortal body, a priest of truly apostolic zeal, a man who renewed in his person the austerities of the desert Fathers along with their protracted mental prayer and their constant union with God. When I name him, those who knew him will avow that I have not exaggerated and will recognize in the portrait that I have traced the late Father Bouïn, the well-known spiritual director of the Seminary of Saint Sulpice. The visible signs of his eminent virtue led several of the great prelates who happened to be in the house when he died to beg eagerly for some of the instruments of penance with which he had martyred his body and to treasure them as relics.

How many other saintly souls did that man of God train? How many holy priests and fervent ministers did he prepare for the Church of Jesus Christ? How many evangelical laborers, such as St. Paul described them and whom the Church so desperately needs, did he send forth into the Father's vineyard? Under so eminent a master, what progress in virtue must such a disciple have made? Filled from his youth with the choicest blessings of heaven, enrolled in an institution where grace rained down abundantly on the souls of all those who sought entry with pure intention and a sincere desire to give themselves to God, John Baptist lived in the company of a select group of young clerics of his own age, chosen from all over France, filled like him with fervor and determined to pursue virtue even more than knowledge. In this school, where he was taught by the most accomplished ecclesiastics of the time, what giant steps in the path of holiness did he make, especially since he had come there with nothing else in mind?

From the start he appeared at Saint Sulpice as a very gentle-natured youth. Far from drawing down on himself the least reproach or from displeasing anyone, he showed himself extremely obliging to all. He set aside everything in his clothing and exterior deportment that might have suggested the airs and maxims of the world. In a word, he showed himself very edifying and became the model of the house during the entire time he remained there.

His professors, however, did not fully realize how virtuous their disciple was until several years after he had left the seminary. When he came back to Paris as the Founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, the heroic virtues which they saw him practice, especially his patience when he was dis-

dained, contradicted and vilified by some who had the ear of his ecclesiastical superiors, made them aware of the striking progress that their former student had made in virtue.

Such was the testimony they gave of him at the seminary, where compliments are rare and pronounced only with truly ecclesiastical parsimony. Those familiar with the spirit of that holy institution know that the aim of those in charge of the place is to make people holy, not to canonize them ahead of time. If the testimony is short, it is certainly laudatory; and it deserves all the more consideration because the one who issued the statement was the successor of Louis Tronson, the late Father L'Eschassier, a man of uncommon judgment, whose wisdom and eminent virtue were not infrequently praised even by his own worst enemies. This worthy superior spoke little but said much in few words, for all his words counted. Everything that fell from his lips was carefully weighed, full of good sense and of the Spirit of God.

The testimony of Father L'Eschassier agrees completely with the verdict of many other ecclesiastics living in various provinces of the kingdom who had attended the seminary at the same time as De La Salle. When they happened to meet some of the Brothers later on, they seldom failed to inquire how he was; they had not forgotten him. After praising him for his virtue, they usually concluded by saying that he had been the model for everyone at the seminary. Anyone who knows what a high degree of fervor reigned there in those days among the young clerics can appreciate the value of this testimony: that De La Salle was the model of all, even of the fervent, in an institution renowned for sanctity. Truly a short but eloquent testimonial!

What rich fruits of virtue would not such a good tree have brought forth, planted in such excellent soil and watered by the dew of heaven, at least if it had had time to plunge its roots deeply into the earth! One would have thought that God, who had brought De La Salle to Saint Sulpice and settled him there, would have let him remain for a number of years--time enough to be nourished and fortified--and that He would not have made him leave the place until, like so many others, he had won his Licentiate and his Doctorate and had acquired a full measure of the ecclesiastical spirit.

Such indeed was the desire of the young canon himself and of his virtuous parents. But, O depths of the designs of God! The Most High decided otherwise. He had brought John Baptist to Saint Sulpice only to give him a glimpse of what true virtue is, to inspire him with a taste for it, and to sow the seeds of such virtue in his tender heart. He reserved for Himself the task of causing these seeds to germinate, of molding the young cleric in secret with His own hands, and of leading him to carry out His eternal decrees by paths sure and straight indeed, but obscure, hidden and unknown to all.

It sufficed for God's plans that John Baptist should spend only a year and a half in the Seminary of Saint Sulpice. After that he had to leave to go back to the tumult of the world where he would find himself taken up with family concerns. He would have to become the guardian of his brothers and sisters, orphaned by the untimely deaths of their parents, who therefore became his responsibility. How incomprehensible are God's ways! It was by this meandering path,

by this unlikely road which seemed to wander away from the goal toward which Providence had been directing him, that God would bring him where He wanted him. The deaths of his parents, which called him home from Saint Sulpice, caused him to leave the path of holiness by one gate but helped him reenter it by another.

Chapter III

Death of His Parents. He Leaves the Seminary.
Family Duties. His Advancement in Holy Orders.
His Efforts at Acquiring Perfection.

As long as De La Salle remained at Saint Sulpice, he gave no thought to anything except advancing in virtue and profiting by the examples he saw around him to further his own sanctification. In that holy institution he was fully occupied by the "one thing necessary." Applying himself to study, he applied himself equally to striving after perfection; he made the one promote the other. He had no desire for erudition except insofar as it would make him more useful to the Church.

With ample time to think about his future, in a seminary to which a young man goes only in order to give himself entirely to God, he took advantage of his solitude to reflect seriously on his obligations and duties, on the holiness required by his state, and on the perfection it calls for. After deliberating on the question of whether he should definitively embrace the clerical state and bind himself to it with unbreakable bonds, he was preparing to do this when he learned of his mother's death, which had occurred on July 20, 1671.

This cruel blow for a heart as tender as his did not cause him to interrupt his studies, but it led him to delay for some time the pledging himself to the clerical state. God allowed all this to make that resolve all the more solid and pure. Since De La Salle was to walk on the road to Calvary all the rest of his life, his mother's death was the first link in the chain of tribulations which were multiplied day after day and ended only with his own death. Almost every day would bring its own sorrow, would be marked by a new cross. He was about to go back to the world but only so that when he left it again his departure would be noticed all the more. He returned to the world only to feel its thorns, to experience its nothingness, to despise its vanity, to conceive a greater horror for it, and to pronounce in its regard a solemn, entire and perpetual divorce.

The wound which the death of his mother had opened in his heart had not had time to heal fully when the news of his father's death reopened it, making the hurt even deeper and more painful. His father's death occurred some nine months later, on April 9, 1672. It is not difficult to imagine what thoughts occupied this soul, so attuned to noble sentiments and endowed with such a rich nature. What a depth of resignation to God's will must he not have needed to bear up

under this new trial! No doubt he had to call upon all the reserves of virtue he possessed to endure such cruel losses with peace of heart. It took all the resources of grace that the Seminary of Saint Sulpice could provide in order to console him.

Fortunately, John Baptist was in a place where one finds in one's superiors and directors a tender charity, fatherly hearts, and unfailing kindness. Nevertheless, he had to go back to Rheims without delay, and this need disturbed him more than anything else. Family business, domestic cares and the responsibility for his orphaned brothers and sisters called him insistently. These claims on him forced him to give up what he would have preferred to do.

Anyone who possesses the ecclesiastical spirit and loves the sources whence it flows can readily understand the regret that John Baptist felt when he was obliged to interrupt the course of his studies, to leave a house where he felt so happy, and to lose simultaneously such powerful support and such outstanding examples of clerical perfection. All his own plans were disrupted, but God's were not. Grace accompanied him wherever he went and led him to holiness by other means. He who had entered the seminary with such great joy on October 18, 1670, found himself obliged to say good-bye to it with a like regret on April 19, 1672.

He departed, however, penetrated with the ecclesiastical spirit, aglow with fervor, and already a perfect man or one who would not long delay in becoming such. "It can be said to the credit of the Seminary of Saint Sulpice," declared the spiritual sons of De La Salle, who so often heard him express his inmost thoughts on this subject and listened to the praise he lavished on this great institution, "that there he acquired the spirit of God, that from Saint Sulpice he learned the virtues which all through his life shone forth in him with such luster. He always loved that training school for evangelical laborers and never spoke of it except with the warmest expressions of esteem and respect."

He gave proof of this when he returned to Paris to establish his Institute there. He opened his first school in the parish of Saint Sulpice, wishing to draw as near as possible to the place where he had received the first lessons in the true ecclesiastical spirit and where he might easily consult Fathers Tronson, Boüin, and L'Eschassier, whose guidance he eagerly sought and whose counsels he considered as laws.

He was only twenty-one when he found himself in charge of his family affairs, of the education of his brothers and sisters, and of the household itself. This was a heavy burden for him at this age, but his character was not the kind that makes burdens heavier by useless worry and overconcern. The will of God, which he adored in the action of Providence, helped a great deal to lighten his burden, for the divine will had always been the star which guided his decisions in the obscure night of worldly affairs. Amidst the storms and tempests which these affairs provoke, he kept his mind on an even keel and his heart at peace.

Having become his own master at this time, in possession of his paternal heritage and with the option of choosing a career in the world rather than in the clerical state, he was happy to have another chance to reaffirm his prior

decision and to acquire new merit before God. He rejoiced in being free only in order to have the satisfaction of ratifying at a mature age, by assuming irrevocable commitments, the consecration to God which he had made in his youth. His heart had made that choice early in life; grace had inspired it; a very obvious vocation had determined it; nothing henceforth was capable of causing him to change his mind or to unsettle a resolve which his stay at Saint Sulpice had so powerfully confirmed.

Still, in a matter of such importance, he did not wish to follow his own lights exclusively. He had learned the lessons of Saint Sulpice too well to heed any other voice but that of obedience. In the seminary he had noticed that most of the young clerics presented themselves for ordination only with fear and trembling and in tears, and that they did so only after receiving from their superiors and directors the recommendation to go ahead. He knew that it was from the bishop or his representative that one should hear the words, "Friend, go up higher."

Finally, he was accustomed to the Sulpician practice of not doing anything without permission and of sanctifying the least actions by performing them through obedience; hence he took care not to proceed in a matter of such supreme importance on his own initiative. Filled with these convictions but being no longer a seminarian, he looked about for a man endowed with the spirit of Saint Sulpice to become his spiritual director. He found one in Nicholas Roland, a canon like himself and a theologian of the Cathedral Chapter.

This zealous priest, whose piety was as solid as it was enlightened, was involved in many good works. He did not limit himself to being present in the choir nor to the minimum duties of a canon. He had great talent and made good use of it for the glory of God and the salvation of his neighbor. During his life he enjoyed an outstanding reputation in Rheims; and after his death his memory was held in benediction, especially among the Sisters whose community he founded under the patronage of the Child Jesus. These Sisters conducted gratuitous schools for girls in the various quarters of the city and also gave a Christian education to orphan girls.

Having chosen Canon Roland as his spiritual guide, De La Salle abandoned himself completely to his direction. No doubt, in thus turning to Nicholas Roland he had no idea of the designs of Providence in his regard. But they were beginning to make themselves felt; and by this choice God was leading John Baptist into the path He wanted him to follow. In fact, the spiritual son in a short time fell heir to the zeal that his spiritual father displayed and to the good works he directed. Furthermore, the activity of Canon Roland, excellent though it was, was only a rough outline of what Providence wished to bring into being through De La Salle, for the latter's zeal was not to be limited to the city of Rheims but was destined to produce its effects throughout France.

Father Nicholas Roland did not know all this either. If he had known what manner of man was this young canon whom God had sent him to direct and what a destiny awaited him, he would have honored the master in his young disciple and

would have considered himself a child compared with this hero among men who was to make such giant strides in the path of evangelical perfection, and who was to establish throughout France, despite all the antagonism of men and all the efforts of hell, the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools for the gratuitous education of the poor.

Guided no doubt by some supernatural insight, Canon Roland beheld in De La Salle the man who would succeed him in the direction of the undertaking he himself had begun. Because zeal for Christian instruction was the director's overriding concern, he tried by all means to make his disciple share it. This was the usual subject of their frequent conversations. It was, then, under the direction of this excellent guide that De La Salle began to interest himself in the education of youth. It was his friend's zeal that lighted the fire of enthusiasm for Christian and gratuitous schools in the soul of the young canon and led him eventually to establish such schools all over the kingdom.

Since Canon Roland's virtue deserved De La Salle's total confidence, it also made the latter entirely submissive towards his spiritual father. Following the orders of his director, John Baptist delayed no longer in fixing himself definitively in the clerical state by assuming perpetual obligations. And since there were no ordinations in Rheims just then, he was obliged to go elsewhere to receive the sacrament; first he tried Laon, then Noyon, and finally Cambrai, where the four minor orders and the subdiaconate were conferred on him at Pentecost, 1672.

What did Jesus Christ bring about in his heart on this momentous occasion? What treasures of grace did He bestow on such a pure and well-prepared soul? We can only guess. De La Salle's reminiscences do not tell us anything about this important point. Still, if the man of God kept shrouded in deep silence all that the Holy Spirit wrought in his soul on that day, the rest of his life reveals clearly enough what happened. It shows us that this reception of sacred orders was not sterile in gifts from God and that the heroic virtues which he so often displayed later on were the fruits that flowed therefrom.

De La Salle continued to wish that he might return to the Seminary of Saint Sulpice and indeed planned on doing so in order to complete his course of studies and to perfect his clerical training. The further he progressed in virtue the more he was attracted to that institution which provides so many edifying examples, so many means of sanctification and so many helps to attain it. However, the family affairs which had brought him back to Rheims forced him to give up his pious desire and induced him to try to find the means of sanctifying himself in the place where Providence had put him.

To succeed in this he turned his home into a sanctuary of retreat, study and mental prayer--I was about to say, into a sort of seminary like Saint Sulpice--and he proceeded to enroll at the Theological Faculty of the University of Rheims so as to obtain the degrees that Providence had not allowed him to take at the Sorbonne. Given to study and to prayer, he divided his time between these two occupations; and if he withdrew a few moments from both, it was to spend them in charitable works. His life was like that of a fervent seminarian of Saint Sulpice

and a constant preparation for the diaconate, which, on the recommendation of his spiritual director, he received in Paris in 1676.

Without comparing our young deacon with the first of the Church's long line of saintly deacons, I venture to apply to him, with due proportion, the words that the Holy Spirit used in canonizing Saint Stephen: "He was filled with grace and the Holy Spirit." The modesty, calm, and grace which all who met him observed in John Baptist suggested this flattering comparison; and more than once when he ministered at the altar or when he was at prayer or on other occasions, people might have thought (as his contemporaries thought of Stephen) that "his face was like that of an angel."

Chapter IV

His Preparation for the Priesthood. The Edifying Manner in Which He Says Mass.

There remained the priesthood for him to receive. To prepare himself for ordination, he renewed his efforts to achieve self-discipline and sought to increase his fervor so as to measure up to the eminent dignity he aspired to. He separated himself more completely from the world and practiced an even stricter regularity of life. He watched over his conduct with greater vigilance while living in deeper recollection. He studied with greater application; he showed renewed modesty, devotion, and assiduity to the canonical Office. Such were the virtues which he felt called upon to practice during the two years remaining before his ordination to the priesthood. Could he do too much to get ready for that great day?

The priestly role, which angels might fear to assume, the dignity which those heavenly spirits might well find too weighty, certainly called for as much preparation as possible. Who can consider it without awe or come forward to receive it without a shiver of apprehension? One of the holiest priests of this century, the founder and first superior of the minor seminary of Saint Sulpice, used to tell his disciples that one had to be blind when he presented himself for ordination: blind, either through sin and passion, or blind through childlike obedience which sets aside all reasoning and discussion.

The man who made this remark had exemplified it in his own life. He had put off his own ordination for many years on the most varied pretexts; in the end only blind obedience succeeded in making him consent; and even then it was with tears, sighs and groans. He showed his reluctance like a man being dragged to execution.

De La Salle had been brought up with the same convictions and was filled with similar sentiments. He felt the same sort of hesitation and holy horror for the reception of a sacrament which, while raising him to the pinnacle of the temple, also exposed him to the furious assaults of the wicked spirit and showed him the frightful abyss into which he might fall. In spite of all this,

he had learned to obey and obey he did, deferring to the one who took God's place in his regard and whose voice he could not contradict. He was ordained on Holy Saturday, April 9, 1678, at the age of twenty-seven, by his own archbishop in the metropolitan church of Rheims where he served as a canon.

John Baptist said his first Mass the next day. His entire life had been one long preparation for celebrating this dread Sacrifice, and every day for the previous two years he had been trying to dispose himself for it with ever-renewed fervor. He knew that "every high priest is chosen from among his fellow men and made a representative of men in their dealings with God, to offer gifts and sacrifices in expiation of their sins"(Hebrews V, 1).

Having thus become a priest of the new covenant, he hastened to fulfill his ministry and to carry out his principal duty, which was to sacrifice the Divine Victim and to offer a God in sacrifice to God. All his life he had felt such a great yearning for this divine role, such an attraction to it, that later on he never failed to celebrate Mass when it was at all possible for him to do so. His religious spirit, his respect and devotion towards this most august of all mysteries did not keep him away from it; and far from saying Mass only when he was obliged to do so, he looked on the offering of this sacrifice as the principal and essential duty of his priesthood and as a daily duty for himself.

At the same time, to make sure that he would celebrate Mass with grace and benefit, he strove to live in a manner befitting his august functions, in a way which would make him worthy to repeat his sacrifice every day. His eagerness to say Mass was equaled only by his concern to say it well. If he made it a rule to celebrate every day, he made it another to do so with a devotion which was renewed every day. For fear that this daily action might become contaminated with routine and that he might acquire a dangerous familiarity with the altar, he took care to keep the fire of divine charity and the flame of a living and active faith ever burning on the altar of his heart through a life of retreat, mortification, prayer and recollection. By living in this fashion he made himself worthy of drawing near to the altar every day.

He said his first Mass the day after his ordination in the Cathedral with no special fanfare. He wanted it that way in the hope of maintaining himself in total recollection, union with God, under the fresh impressions of the grace of ordination, and in full attentiveness to the movements of the Holy Spirit. Such were the reasons which led him to dispense with any special ceremony, which on such occasions can constitute a dangerous distraction that enfeebles devotion and turns the mind aside from the concentration required by an action which transcends all else.

What did he look like when saying Mass for the first time? No doubt like one of the seven blessed spirits who forever stand before the throne of God, if one of them were to descend to earth to offer Mass in the shape of a mortal man. Modesty, piety, reverence and devotion revealed on his face and in all his exterior comportment the impressions made on his soul by the awesome mysteries he was celebrating. The sight would have been capable of inspiring faith in these mysteries even in the most obstinate heretics.

The air of sanctity which he wore on the occasion of his first Mass was not something that he forthwith lost. He never lost it. Its root was within him in the fund of grace and virtues he had acquired, while the presence of the Holy Spirit was its source. This attitude only grew stronger in him with every Mass he celebrated.

If all his previous life had been one long preparation for his first Mass, this Mass was a preparation for the second, the second for the third, and so on. Today's Mass prepared him for tomorrow's. To revive one's faith in the real presence of Jesus Christ in the Blessed Sacrament and to feel sentiments of true devotion spring up in one's heart, all one needed to do was to watch the young priest at the altar. People used to come to his Mass to be edified and touched so as to share in his piety. They were recollected, moved. They felt themselves changed when they witnessed the recollection, the deep respect, the majestic attitude which he displayed while exercising his sacred ministry. They waited for him when he left the altar to profit by the graces which he had received during Mass.

When he had finished his thanksgiving, people laid hold of him, so to speak, as though fearing he might escape from them. Everyone wanted to consult him and to share the lights he had received. He was like Moses who drew from his conversation with God a depth of understanding which extended to all those who drew near to him. His youth created no obstacle to the confidence which his piety inspired; for although as yet he was just a young priest, he seemed to be a saint.

He possessed the spirit of God. Everyone was sure of this, especially those who had been present at his Mass. The result was that he was besieged by persons who came to him seeking advice inspired by the Holy Spirit. Like the Lawgiver of the Old Testament, he seemed to be the mildest of men after his periods of deep communing with God. He listened patiently, answered kindly, and seasoned all his words with a grace and an unction which helped them penetrate hearts and made them effective for good. In all he said he sowed the seeds of piety.

Everything he did was marked with the sign of charity. He dissipated people's doubts, resolved their difficulties and gave them rules for their conduct. He adapted himself to varying characters; he accommodated himself to differing dispositions; he put up with importunity and even favored the action of grace despite the defects which usually oppose its action. He possessed the art of drawing souls to God, of finding the key to hearts and of making divine love enter them. By all this he showed that a priest is never truly inexperienced when he is moved by the Spirit of God. God spoke through him because he spoke incessantly to God and only repeated to men what God had taught him. Such a priest was truly fit to become an instrument of God's greatest designs, the mouthpiece for His oracles. So he had become a man of God, responsible for men's interests before God and of God's interests before men. Taught by God Himself, he knew what he had to announce to men as coming from God. Pleasing to God as he was, he was what he had to be in order that God might listen to him when he pleaded for his fellowmen.

However, it frequently happened that when he left the altar after his colloquies with God, De La Salle was not able to begin dealing with men right away because he was so absorbed in Him Whom he had just received that he could scarcely turn his attention to anyone or anything else. What a happy obstacle to charity towards one's neighbor! What a desirable impediment to communication with creatures! At such times he seemed to be so filled with Jesus Christ Who dwelt within him, so recollected, and so united with his Divine Guest present within his breast, that he could scarcely make use of his senses. At such times he seemed immobile, his whole exterior seized with a sacred calm, while interiorly he was at liberty to enjoy the presence of his Beloved. A number of persons of high credibility witnessed this. This sort of ecstasy arose from the captivity which he had imposed on his senses, from the strictness with which he treated his body, and from the habit he had acquired of seeing God alone in all things. He had become accustomed to this manner of living, thanks to his separation from the world, for he had cut off all contact with it insofar as good manners and the requirements of his domestic affairs allowed. He loved to be alone and shunned appearing in public, but he was never less alone than when in solitude because he was always with God. No one ever saw him different from himself: recollected, modest, united to the Sovereign Good. He was so quiet and unruffled amidst all the happenings of life that one might have thought that Divine Providence had arranged them all according to his wishes and desires.

This strict control of the senses in which he lived made him all but insensible to the attractiveness of creatures; most sensible objects seemed to be invisible to him. He lived on earth as though he dwelt alone with God, happy to have forgotten all the rest. He was in one sense like those lifeless idols adored by the sacrilegious and foolish pagans of whom the royal Prophet says, "They have eyes and see not, ears and hear not, tongues and speak not." Or rather, he made use of these faculties only for what related to God. Those ironic words by which the Prophet mocked the gentile gods and underscored their nothingness portray in a most realistic way the attitude of young De La Salle and serve to reveal the depths of his interior life.

Not that De La Salle was able to close his eyes and ears to everything surrounding him nor that he lived like a savage, refusing to take part in civilized intercourse with others. He did nothing singular or out of place. Like Jesus Christ he lived like a man amongst men and occupied his place in society. But under these external appearances of an ordinary existence, he led another, an extraordinary inner life, a supernatural, interior and heavenly existence which maintained him in such great detachment from his senses, in such complete indifference to external things, in such sublime elevation above all, that we can truly say that he saw without seeing and listened without hearing; for nothing of what he saw or heard made a deep impression on his soul or was able to penetrate the depths of his heart.

Was he then, when standing at the altar, proof against the swarming distractions that even the most virtuous persons have so much trouble fighting off? Having won the mastery over his imagination, could he even constrain it to leave him in peace during the holy mysteries and not to disturb his repose in God? Yes! He himself mentions in his memoirs that he experienced neither the wan-

derings of a distracted mind nor the illusions of a vagabond imagination. This privilege is certainly a very precious one, most extraordinary and unusual; but what does God not do for those whom He has chosen to render Him extraordinary services?

This saintly priest had such an elevated idea of his ministry that he venerated everything relating to it. He wanted everything used in church to be clean and decent. Full of respect for the sanctity of the sacred mysteries, he believed that whatever had any connection with them could not be too rich or magnificent. In this regard he showed the prodigality proper to the saints. The disappointment he felt when he could not say Mass was equaled only by the satisfaction he felt when he did celebrate it. It took a very serious illness or a real disability to keep him from celebrating Mass; and when this occurred, the privation of saying Mass made him suffer more than the illness itself.

Often he drew enough strength from his sheer courage to satisfy his ardent devotion. More than once he was seen dragging himself or being led to the altar in order to celebrate Mass and to nourish himself with the Bread of Life. After Communion he frequently fell into deep rapture, and it was in these elevations of his mind and heart to God that he learned to despise the world and acquired a fine disregard for its opinions.

Such a lesson he sorely needed to learn because the task God had in store for him and which as yet he had no inkling of required a man steeled against the attacks of human malignity. Since he was to experience opposition, snubs, scorn and calumny, since he was destined to endure all that blackest envy can invent, all the poison distilled by evil tongues, all the mockery and malice that the heart of man conceals, he needed it from the very beginning of his priestly career. The lofty idea he had of his sacerdotal functions and of the holiness that these require in those honored by this calling was so deeply impressed on his mind that he could not, without feeling wounded, behold other priests profaning their eminent dignity by leading a worldly life. He reproached them with their unbecoming conduct, and this sometimes drew down insults on him. His zeal in castigating these persons seemed exaggerated to worldly-minded people.

On one occasion the young minister of the Lord gave proof of his zeal by censuring an ecclesiastic who gave bad example; this led to his being criticized and to a good deal of gossip on the part of those idle people who make slander their habitual occupation and are never inclined to give a verdict in favor of true piety. De La Salle had tried in every possible way and in the gentlest fashion to make this man realize what he was doing. When he saw that his charitable admonitions were without result, he finally drew the weapons of zeal and showed the delinquent that charity can also be stern; but this he did in secret in a personal conversation, as Jesus Christ ordains, for fear of embittering the guilty one and of scandalizing others.

This secret rebuke having proved as unavailing as the previous admonitions, De La Salle judged that it was time to bring the matter into the open so as to do away with an occasion of scandal for others if he could not convert the

scandal-giver. He did not succeed in this latter endeavor, but he met with success in the former; he reprimanded the incorrigible person publicly and with so much energy that the latter left Rheims, preferring to change his residence rather than his way of living.

Chapter V

De La Salle's Director Suggests That He Exchange His Canonry for a Parish in the City of Rheims. John Baptist Prepares to Carry Out This Plan. The Virtue and Blind Submission He Displays on This Occasion.

Noting the progress that his disciple was making in perfection and his great docility to the suggestions made to him, Canon Roland resolved to take advantage of these dispositions for a special project he had thought of. The plan, however, did not meet with the success he had hoped for because apparently the Holy Spirit had not inspired it. Providence prevented the realization of the plan through the opposition of the one person on whose approval success depended and who refused to give it his approbation. Here is what happened. And this story shows in its true colors the state of soul of the young canon shortly after his ordination and brings out the detachment, total indifference, submission and spirit of sacrifice that characterized his life at this time.

Seeing John Baptist "filled with grace and the Holy Spirit" and endowed with the talents needed in governing souls along with the strength and courage required for success in the most difficult undertakings, his director thought that a parish would be a more appropriate position for him than a canon's stall, and that as a parish priest he would be more useful to the Church than as a member of the Cathedral Chapter. In so thinking he seemed to have misjudged or forgotten the scope of a canon's vocation. These men make up the Church's senate. As the bishop's primary advisers, they should be his first ministers, his most faithful cooperators, men at his disposal to labor under his eyes and by his orders, not in some corner of the diocese, not for the good of a single parish, not for the benefit of a single enterprise, but for the whole diocese.

Canons should be ready to undertake all sorts of good works. Canon Roland was forgetting his own career because his role as a canon did not limit the exercise of his zeal. It set him free, rather, to undertake many activities and never prevented him from utilizing his talents for the conversion of souls, nor from spending himself in various enterprises, nor even from undertaking new ones for the greater utility of the Church. Could it have been that in proposing this scheme the worthy theologian had in view some advantage for his own recently founded Institute? Did he feel that De La Salle as a parish priest might be able to further its development more than De La Salle could do as a canon?

Be that as it may, the director wished to see his disciple become the pastor of the parish of Saint Peter in Rheims. Hence he suggested to him the idea of exchanging his canonry for the position of the incumbent parish priest.

He must have felt quite sure of De La Salle's virtue to make a suggestion of this kind because it could have been acceptable only to a man dead to everything and ready for any kind of sacrifice.

It is well known how people in general look upon a canonry at Rheims and in most provincial cities. To obtain one is the aim of all those whose families destine them for the service of the Church and the desire of their families as well. Most of the time their ambitions stop there. A canon's prebend fulfills their highest hopes for an established position. Wealthy people and those of average virtue who do not care to take a place among the ordinary clergy feel honored on being offered a place among the canons of the main churches.

According to the spirit of the world, by proposing that De La Salle should leave his canonry in order to become a parish priest, Father Roland was suggesting to him to come down a step or two in the ecclesiastical world and to take a lower place in order to give the higher spot to another. Could De La Salle have heard such a suggestion without being taken aback unless he had overcome all sensitivity about points of honor?

Considerable opposition arose in connection with the director's plan. The parish of Saint Peter in Rheims was a very extensive one; it required a man of mature years and experience, both of which De La Salle lacked. The burden seemed heavier than his youthful shoulders could carry. In addition, he still had the responsibility for his family affairs, for the education of his orphan brothers and sisters, for the direction of his household. Should he forget the claims which had obliged him to give up a longer stay in the Seminary of Saint Sulpice, which he loved so much and which it had cost him such a wrench to leave? Could he combine his pastoral responsibilities with those of his guardianship?

Either Canon Roland had never thought of all this or else he was inspired in a strange way. Of course, it often happens that the Spirit of God suggests various pious plans without intending them to be carried out in fact. Through God's inspiration David conceived the desire of building Him a temple, but, by the mouth of Nathan the prophet, God put a stop to the execution of this design, while approving it and blessing its originator. Saint Louis made a vow to lead his army to wrest the Holy Land from the power of the Mohammedans; yet his project failed even though it had certainly been inspired by the Spirit of God.

Perhaps God, Who not long afterwards was going to demand that De La Salle sacrifice not only his canonry but all his other possessions as well, was using this proposal advanced by Canon Roland to prepare him for total renunciation. God may also have wished to give others a remarkable example of zeal, detachment, Christian simplicity and docility in the person of the young canon. It is even possible that in God's eternal designs the worth of what De La Salle was prepared to do would merit for him the grace given him later on of leaving everything, like the Apostles, to follow Jesus Christ poor, naked, and bereft of all.

The proposal made by his director found a willing reception in the heart of his disciple. He wanted only what God wanted; hence it made no difference to him whether he was a canon or a parish priest. What mattered to him was the will of God; and convinced that the voice of God spoke to him in that of his spiritual father, he resolved to exchange his prebend for the position of parish priest of Saint Peter in Rheims. As soon as he heard Canon Roland's suggestion, De La Salle accepted it without criticism, without argument. To put it into execution immediately, he left at once for Paris where his archbishop, Charles Maurice Le Tellier, happened to be. We thus witness a remarkable example of detachment and of that spiritual childhood which opens the door to the Kingdom of heaven and which Jesus Christ so strongly recommended to His disciples.

No doubt, all God was asking of the young canon was this act of consent. He beheld in this disposition of heart an excellent preparation for the great sacrifices that He would inspire him to make later on. After having tried him, like Abraham, and put his obedience, fidelity, detachment and love to the test, He was content; and without refusing the sacrifice, He postponed it by inspiring a superior authority to oppose it. Here is how this came about.

De La Salle's relatives, interested as they were in what concerned him, while admiring the great virtue he showed, were alarmed over his decision and thought it their duty to prevent the plan from being carried out. They succeeded by appealing directly to the archbishop and thus caused the measures planned by the spiritual director and his disciple to fail. Archbishop Le Tellier, on learning of the plan, did not approve of it and refused to authorize the exchange.

Thus the two interested parties who had come seeking his consent were quite surprised when he told each to remain in the calling which God had chosen for him. This decision by the prelate was accepted by John Baptist as an order from God Himself, and he submitted to the voice of his archbishop with the same docility that had made him obey that of his director. He had wanted to be a parish priest only because he thought that God was asking him through Canon Roland to make the change. As soon as Archbishop Le Tellier told him to forget about it, he no longer wished to be a parish priest. Later on he declared several times that he seemed to hear an inner voice which spoke in the same vein as the archbishop, one which told him that he was not called to be a parish priest.

The pastor of Saint Peter's, who had been very eager for the exchange to take place, was the one who seemed more disappointed. He would have been less put out, or rather he would not have been annoyed at all, if his views had been as pure as those of De La Salle and if, like him, he had been equally detached from his own personal interests. At all events, the faith, simplicity and docility with which the young canon had laid his case before his superior, in whom he saw only Jesus Christ, no doubt drew down on them both the light of heaven. If we judge by what happened later on, we must agree that the archbishop was rightly inspired on this occasion; for if he had accepted the request presented to him, it is more than likely that De La Salle, burdened with the responsibility for a large parish, would never have thought of extending his zeal beyond its boundaries and would never have established his Institute.

By maintaining De La Salle at his place in the Cathedral Chapter, the archbishop no doubt thought only of keeping there a priest of great merit who gave such fine example, a laborer capable of doing much work in the vineyard, a canon likely to render important services to the diocese. The archbishop realized very well that by allowing De La Salle to take on the duties of a parish priest he would have set limits to his zeal and talents, and that by restricting them to the boundaries of a single parish he would indeed have deprived the rest of his diocese from profiting by them.

This, so far as one can surmise, was all that the archbishop had in mind; but God's views extended much farther. His design was to withdraw the light from under the basket and to set it high on the mountain since it was destined to shed its brilliance over all the kingdom. God planned to liberate a zeal which did not recognize any limits and which would have been unduly restricted to the city and to the diocese of Rheims. On his return home De La Salle applied himself once more to his duties as a canon and to prepare himself through continual study, retirement and prayer to carry out to the fullest extent the vocation God had given him, by joining to the duty of chanting God's praises that of winning souls for Him.

He knew that a canon who is also a priest and who possesses talent, health and the consent of his bishop should, according to the intentions of the Church, be an apostolic worker. So, he did not limit his activity merely to attending the canonical Office. He wanted to labor in the Lord's vineyard and to fulfill the functions proper to his priestly character. As a canon he made it a duty to be assiduous in the choir and to go there in the name of all the faithful of the diocese to pay the homage due to the Divine Majesty. As a priest he considered himself an evangelical worker, a dispenser of the mysteries of Christ, a minister of the Church, a helper and co-worker of the bishop. He did not think that a canonry should become a privilege that would justify his remaining idle and unoccupied in the Father's vineyard.

In Father Roland, his director, he found a model in this regard, for the virtuous theologian took care not to bury the talents given to him by the Lord, and he did not limit his zeal to occupying his place in the Cathedral choir stalls. Everywhere he saw good crying to be done, and he hastened to undertake it. He lent himself to all kinds of good works, but his special interest was Christian and gratuitous schools. Before he died he sought to communicate his interest to his beloved disciple. He even asked him to take charge of the schoolmistresses that he had succeeded in establishing in Rheims.

I do not know whether I am putting the death of Canon Roland in its proper place here, for the various memoirs on the life of De La Salle do not agree on this point, nor on the time when the scheme arose for exchanging his canonry, which we have already mentioned, nor on several other matters. However, in writing the lives of those who have died in the odor of sanctity, the main consideration is to edify the reader by giving an account of their virtues. Even if we do not accurately keep track of when certain events took place (whose precise dates we have not been able to verify), it will not make a great difference.

What is certain is that not long after De La Salle was ordained and was obliged by his archbishop to retain his position as a canon, he lost his saintly director. This was, in the plan of Divine Providence, one means used to lead John Baptist to his true path in life. The young canon became the successor of Father Roland in his undertaking and also inherited his zeal. Starting with a very limited involvement, he went ahead, as though blindly, without at all foreseeing his goal and without intending it, but led on by Divine Providence to found his Institute. Let us follow him in this journey as he proceeded, like Abraham, on the path marked out for him by God, without knowing where it would lead or where it would end.

As we mentioned before, Nicholas Roland, his director, a canon and theologian of the Cathedral of Rheims, was a most zealous and virtuous priest and a tireless evangelical worker. To a solid and enlightened piety he joined an ardent, indefatigable and hardworking zeal. His duties as official theologian gave him the opportunity of exercising his zeal and of making use, for the benefit of souls, of the great oratorical talent heaven had given him. Such far-ranging zeal did not exhaust itself in his duties as a professor of theology, although this in itself was a very demanding occupation. He went everywhere he was called; his words were effective, backed up as they were by his example. The harvest of this divine seed sprang up abundantly wherever he scattered it and watered it with his sweat.

But while it is true that the glory of God and the salvation of souls are the aims of all Gospel laborers, it is also true that nearly all of them are inspired to labor in a certain manner and find themselves especially attracted to certain types of work. Roland's overriding interest was the education of the young. The evil lives, defective education and ignorance of the poorer classes moved him to tears and powerfully stimulated his zeal to find a remedy for them. What he was inspired to do about these problems in the city where he lived was to establish Christian and gratuitous schools. This was certainly an excellent cure for the evils he sought to eliminate, but it was not an easy one to apply. To establish gratuitous schools he had to find the resources and funds to support them.

Nor was that all. He had to find teachers, both men and women, capable of instructing the young well and of bringing them up in piety through example as well as through their words. The problem was where to find such teachers, where to discover disinterested, zealous and pious persons fit to carry out a task of this nature. To expect them to come down from heaven already prepared and ready to undertake this task successfully would have been to take pious illusions for realities. The Apostles themselves needed to be instructed by Jesus Christ before attempting to teach others. For three years Our Lord had kept them close to Him, to train them before sending them forth to preach His doctrine.

They were even told not to undertake their work until they had received the light and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Clearly, one cannot teach others what one has not learned oneself. Since virtue is not given us at birth, and since it is only at the cost of labor and great effort that we can acquire it,

we need time, an appropriate place, and capable instructors to help us to acquire it. One must be a learner before he can pretend to teach; one must practice for a long time if one wishes to teach with fruit. The solution to Canon Roland's problem, then, was to establish communities something like seminaries, where men and women would be instructed and prepared in view of bringing up the young in piety and of teaching them Christian doctrine.

Father Roland's zeal led him to consider all these projects, but the grace to put them into execution was reserved for another. De La Salle was the Solomon who was to carry out the lofty plans made by David, his spiritual father, at least as regards the principle of the scheme; for he never undertook to provide gratuitous schools for girls. Father Barré, a Minim filled with apostolic zeal, obedient to the Spirit of God and active in word and deed, had already been inspired to involve himself in this apostolate and had succeeded in founding the Sisters of Providence for the education of girls. His creation has given rise to a great many others, which have multiplied throughout France; but Canon Roland was perhaps the first who took advantage of the idea by establishing a community of school Sisters in Rheims.

It was, however, only after his death and thanks to the efforts of De La Salle that Roland's group achieved full success. Towards the end of his life this pious work, which Roland considered so very necessary for the poor, monopolized his concern, his effort, and his financial resources. The new Society, called Sisters of the Child Jesus, was still in its infancy when God was pleased to call its founder to Himself. On his deathbed his greatest concern was to beg De La Salle to take his place and to be a father to the pious women whom he was leaving behind and whom he had destined to carry out the education of poor orphan girls. It would seem that the director was enlightened by God and foresaw God's designs on his disciple, because he foretold to him that he would one day establish Christian schools for boys. Canon Roland had always wanted to do this himself but had not had time to set about it.

At these final moments, De La Salle was eager to gather up his spiritual father's pious sentiments and to receive from his lips his last wishes. As usual, he felt neither reluctance nor eagerness in this matter. Wanting nothing special for himself, he willed whatever God might ask of him. The dying man could not sufficiently show his tender affection for this beloved spiritual son, nor could the latter adequately express his gratitude to his father in Jesus Christ. Docile to Roland's requests as being the expression of God's will, he agreed to take on the responsibility both of executing the dying man's will and of looking after the community of Sisters, which was still in its infancy. He could not see where God's hand was leading him by this turn of events.

Soon enough, however, he began to feel the weight of the burden he had assumed. Every step he took to provide for the survival of the new Institute brought him fresh difficulties and numerous obstacles. With regret he beheld all these new concerns added to the cares arising from his own domestic affairs, for they preoccupied his mind and took up part of the precious time he consecrated to study and prayer.

He knew that a young priest who wishes to make himself useful to the Church needs time for both these things, and that before devoting himself to his ministry he must build up a solid foundation of virtue and knowledge. He knew that Jesus Christ Himself had given His ministers the example of this wise use of time by spending the first thirty years of His life in obscurity; that Saint John the Baptist, obeying the inspiration of heaven, had also remained for thirty years in the desert preparing himself for the mission of Precursor, and that he had not ventured to begin his career without an express order from God.

These two examples impressed De La Salle deeply and restrained him in the exercise of his zeal. They are indeed most striking and cannot be taken to heart too deeply by ecclesiastics of good will. The Holy of Holies devoted only three years to His public life and His evangelical journeys while spending all the rest of His time on earth in silence and retirement. His Precursor acted in like manner. What a lesson for those whose zeal outruns their prudence! What a reminder to sanctify oneself for a long time by retirement from the world, by prayer and the practice of virtue, before attempting to appear in public in order to sanctify others, before allowing oneself to breathe the polluted air of the world, so corrupt and so corrupting, which only too soon brings about the ruin of a virtue that has not been sufficiently consolidated.

De La Salle also knew that the Apostles and disciples of the Lord were men of mature age, and that before trying to convert the world they had awaited, in prayer and retirement, the descent of the Holy Spirit and the outpouring of His light, His virtues, His strength and all His other gifts. These outstanding examples, imitated down the centuries by all truly apostolic men, deeply impressed our young canon. They inspired him with a holy fear and a prudent restraint, and moderated the impetuosity of his zeal.

Not that he wished to extinguish his zeal or let it languish in a life of pure contemplation. He recalled Saint Augustine's words: "We are Christians for ourselves and priests for you;" and he did not doubt that he owed himself to the service of his neighbor and to the good of the Church. But he did not forget that he also needed to apply to himself the words of his Divine Master: "For them do I sanctify Myself." Such were the considerations which gave rise to his prudent concern and his spiritual uncertainty. It did not take him very long, however, to surmount them when he reflected that God's will had been indicated to him with sufficient clarity and had indeed become quite plain in the way Providence had arranged matters through the pious intentions of his deceased friend.

Rising above his own preferences and filled with confidence in God, overcoming all his repugnances by a generous effort, and animated by a zeal which enlightened "according to knowledge," De La Salle proceeded to honor the memory of Canon Roland and to demonstrate his gratitude to him by undertaking all the measures needed to bring his work to its full development and perfection. This called for much effort and the help of heaven, for new difficulties sprang up every day and grew more and more obstinate. One obstacle appeared after another. When the first was lifted, the devil caused new ones to arise, more thorny than the previous ones.

However, the saintly canon, who had learned his lessons at the feet of Jesus crucified, realized that all God's designs bear the mark of the Cross, and that those which meet with no opposition, which succeed beyond our expectations and never encounter persecution in the world, are works that God looks upon with little favor. They cause little concern to the demon who does not even bother to combat them. In addition, God planned to raise De La Salle to the Cross of Calvary. By trying him out in these first crises, He wished to familiarize him with such crosses, to prepare him for greater ones, and to teach him as He had taught another "vessel of election" "what great things he must suffer for My name's sake," through the founding of the Christian and gratuitous schools for boys, the task for which Providence had chosen him.

I picture our young canon on this occasion like a youthful pilot responsible for guiding a vessel through a passage full of reefs, amidst storm and tempest which threaten to engulf it at every moment. To consolidate this undertaking, which from its founding had tottered on the brink of ruin, he needed personal prestige, authority, influence and human backing, none of which he possessed.

Lacking help from creatures (the common situation of those who labor for the most significant works), he turned to God as to his surest resource. Prayer was the star which set his course and directed him through the dark and stormy night so full of difficulties and obstacles which the world threw into his path. To prayer he joined serious thought and much hard work, for he was convinced that God wants us to do our share while He does His, and to combine our efforts with His help.

To set the Sisters' community on a solid footing, it was necessary to obtain the approbation of the city, the consent of the archbishop, and Letters Patent* from the king, none of which looked particularly easy to obtain. The city fathers felt that Rheims was already overburdened by the various communities which had grown quite numerous in recent years; they considered the establishment of a new one as an added burden and were therefore opposed to it. Versailles, wary of multiplying new religious institutes, did not seem much inclined to grant the Letters Patent. Finally, there was good reason to doubt whether the archbishop would show himself favorable. John Baptist had therefore to convince the magistrates, to win over His Excellency, and to persuade him to ask for the Letters Patent. De La Salle set to work and succeeded all along the line.

His humble and gentle manners soon won the hearts of his fellow citizens. They were quite sure of the purity of his intentions and full of admiration for his virtue; they found it difficult, therefore, to refuse a request which was aimed entirely at benefitting the children of the poor. De La Salle found it easy enough to make the city officials see that this new community, unlike others, would prove an asset to the city, not a burden on it, since its sole aim was to care for poor orphan girls and to instruct children who otherwise would remain a prey to ignorance.

*Letters Patent were letters signed by the King conferring juridical recognition on institutions, groups, etc.

These were social values which the Christian city ought to pursue by all means and which it could neglect only to its own great disadvantage. The new foundation also provided important benefits to religion. From the early years of the Church, Christianity had owed a large part of its success to the zeal of its pastors who often taught school themselves or tried to multiply Christian schools where the children of the faithful, instructed in their faith and educated in piety, were strengthened and prepared even for martyrdom, and where the children of pagans were made to see the error of their parents' religion and encouraged to give it up.

In his request De La Salle also stressed the need to separate the two sexes in school even at an early age and the great inconvenience that resulted when boys and girls were admitted to the classes indiscriminately. Where no Christian schoolmistresses are available to give a Christian education and proper instruction to the girls, these latter are taught by men; and everyone knows what perils this arrangement presents. Modesty, decency, reserve, propriety all run serious risks in such situations.

These virtues make it necessary for us to draw a veil of silence over the sad consequences that would follow their absence. To prevent such a problem, the Church has always promoted the establishment of Christian schools where the two sexes are taught separately. At one time her attitude was even more severe in this matter because in the churches themselves and in the presence of Jesus Christ she separated the men from the women and did not permit them to mingle together even in the place reserved for common prayer.

Our kings, too, Louis XIV (in De La Salle's time) and Louis XV, now happily reigning, convinced of the dangers that arise when children of both sexes are taught together, approved measures forbidding this practice, which certain great prelates had introduced into their dioceses, and confirmed these prohibitions by their edicts.

De La Salle certainly put forward these powerful arguments which explained in part his own interest in the matter. He succeeded in giving them in the minds of his interlocutors all the weight that they had in his own. He dissipated objections, answered difficulties, did away with prejudices. His titles as a fellow citizen, as a relative, as a friend, as the heir of Canon Roland's zeal no less than of his foundation, together with his suggestions and his gracious pleas, were the means he used to sway the officials, so that they found it difficult to resist his arguments.

Still, his request might have gone unanswered if God Himself had not come to his help by His secret inspirations and had not lent the victorious unction of His grace to the words of His servant whose courteous manners disposed people to listen favorably when he spoke. The authorities finally gave in and granted his petition in due and legal form. This first victory won, another remained to be secured; but we must admit that it proved less difficult than the first one, since success in this case depended on his having obtained the city's consent. Once this was assured, Archbishop Le Tellier was glad to give his; and his in turn was a key help in obtaining the Letters Patent.

The archbishop, in fact, was delighted that the city fathers had given their approval to a charitable work which he himself should have been the first to desire and to want to establish, since it concerned him more than anyone else. Not satisfied with giving his approbation, he took it upon himself to obtain the Letters Patent.

The matter was as good as settled once he took it into his hands. His standing at Court was such that he had no qualms about asking for a favor of this sort. At this time the greatest gifts were showered on him, often without his having sought them. A less influential prelate might have failed in this undertaking, or else might have had to resort to infinite pains to get what he wanted; but as the brother of a minister who was most powerful at Court, Archbishop Le Tellier did not need to take so many precautions. Once it was known that Monsieur De Louvois' brother wanted something done, everyone hastened to fall in with his wishes.

Never did the archbishop of Rheims make better use, for the good of his diocese, of the influence he wielded at Court and of the favor he enjoyed with Louis XIV than on that occasion. The Letters Patent were granted as soon as they were requested and were then registered by Parliament at the expense of His Excellency, Maurice Le Tellier, who hastened to send them to the one who had sought them so successfully.

His Excellency did even more. Not only did he grant his protection to a work which he looked upon as his very own; he contributed to its development and provided out of his own funds for the establishment of a house which can rightly be called a sort of seminary for the training of Sisters for the schools. By his protection, his favor and his financial contributions, this foundation got off to a very good start. It soon reached a flourishing state and proved extremely useful to the public.

Thus, if this community owes its origin to Father Roland, it owes its progress to the diligent care of De La Salle. Happy will these Sisters be if they always keep faithful to the spirit of their two founders and if they never turn aside from their early fervor. They have the honor of being the first daughters of De La Salle, the first through whom his zeal found definitive expression. Thus God was trying out his servant's abilities and preparing him through the experience of establishing a house of schoolmistresses for the Christian and gratuitous schools to become the founder of a new religious order of Brothers destined to exercise the same holy and noble task.

Chapter VI

The Servant of God Established Fixed Regulations in His Home; Worldly People Begin to Criticize Him; He Disregards the World's Censure and Resolutely Pursues Perfection.

Young as De La Salle was, he always liked to live by rule; regularity, a cherished virtue, governed all his conduct. He had seen this attitude exemplified at the Seminary of Saint Sulpice and from the first had profited by this manner of acting. In that abode of virtue he had experienced for himself and witnessed in the lives of others what purity of conduct, what innocence of life, what solidity of virtue such fidelity to a rule leads to, especially a rule that is prudent and well tailored to human weakness. Regularity, he knew, must be universal, exact, and inspired by inner conviction. He had made it a strict duty for himself, both inside and outside the seminary, to be perfectly regular. He liked for everything to be done at its proper time: rising, vocal and mental prayer, meals, spiritual reading, other exercises of piety, and the various actions of the day.

His canonical office was the central factor and prime regulator of all the rest. At table he had good books read. The wonder of it is that the young canon, through his example and his appealing manners, had succeeded in persuading his three younger brothers who lived with him to follow a lifestyle which resembled that of a seminary rather than that of a well-to-do household. Such a manner of living, so prayerful, so unworldly, and so well-ordered, could not, of course, meet with the approval of worldly people. They forgave him for it only as long as they remained ignorant of it. When they got wind of it, their outcries, their witticisms, and their censure made it known to those who had not yet heard of it.

This publicity produced varying effects. What were these? Exactly the same as those which the lives of the saints and the Gospel itself have always produced--namely, edification for some and scandal for others. When Saint Paul preached in the Areopagus, the majority of his hearers thought him a fool, a preacher of fables and new gods; the inspired minority believed him and profited by his words. Jesus Christ crucified was an occasion of scandal for the Jews and a topic of derision for the Gentiles; but for those whom the Holy Spirit enlightened, He was the power and the wisdom of God.

All down the centuries the saints, like their divine Master, have been an object of scorn for the world; but for well-disposed souls, they were burning lamps and flaming torches which not only showed the way to perfection but powerfully incited them to follow in the saints' footsteps. Their virtues and example produced good fruit in many of those who witnessed them and often made saints of them.

Nothing is new under the sun. What is, will be till the end of time. What we see now is what was from the beginning. Virtue, persecuted in the per-

son of Abel from the very origin of the world, has continued to suffer ill-treatment in all the just without exception who came after him; and so will it continue to suffer in all those who will live till the end. Without wanting to do so, the world itself is the great maker of saints. In belittling their virtue, it purifies, strengthens and perfects it, making it more worthy of God.

As the world saw it, De La Salle was not living as a canon should. He was not bringing credit either on his Chapter or on his family. Evidently he needed someone to look after him, even as he looked after his brothers and sisters. He did not know how to make proper use of his money. He seemed to have forgotten all the "nice people," and naturally these would have nothing to do with him. His house was open to all the riffraff and the poor, but relatives and friends found the door barred to them. If he did not want to have anything more to do with the world, why did he not leave it? If he had become so unsociable, why did he not go and live in the woods with the animals?

What a sight it was to see him play the role of a religious fanatic and hypocrite while assuming the air of a truly devout person! He was causing genuine devotion to be ill thought of; he brought down discredit on his sacerdotal character. Would he have been less a good canon and priest if he gave up these peculiar ways? So ran the world's comments, with more like them. For fear that he might not know what was being said, he was told all this to his face. Everything he did was a crime. Everything about him was ridiculed. From head to toe there was nothing his critics did not find fault with. They criticized his clothes, his hat, his collars, and a thousand other details.

The young canon profited by all that was said against him, so true is it, as Saint Paul says: "Everything works together for the good of those who love God." He examined himself while the world sifted him; he judged himself more severely than the world did. He acknowledged the judgments of others whenever he believed them well-founded. The world, so enlightened when it comes to seeing the least defects of the devout and which never pardons them anything, helped him to discover within himself the faults hidden there. His critics' severity led him to condemn these faults. The baseless reproaches leveled at him alerted him to other shortcomings which really existed but which the world itself could not see.

Thus society helped him to know himself better and to correct himself. It also taught him to bring his virtues to perfection and to give them all their merit. From this time on he professed an even more open disdain for the secular world and divorced himself more completely from it. Without becoming ill-natured, he grew more solitary; without ceasing to be affable and gracious, he seemed more recollected and more given to the interior life. Instead of going to live with beasts in a solitary form of life, as worldlings had said he should, he sought rather to live in the company of the angels or to converse with perfect men on earth, following the advice of the author of the Imitation who says of priests: "Their conversation should not be with the vulgar and common ways of men but with perfect men on earth."

His life grew more austere, he mortified his senses more rigorously, his hours of prayer grew more frequent, his vigils longer, his whole person more radiant with holiness. In a word, his care and concern for the nobler part of his nature concentrated all his efforts. He became so taken up with cultivating his inner life that he somewhat neglected external matters. Always neat and clean but eager to show outward evidence of poverty, he used only the commonest clothes made of the coarsest type of cloth. Before long Rheims would see him wearing the Brothers' habit.

In later years, to his friends' regret and to the shame and embarrassment of his relatives, he began to wear in public that outfit which they thought disgraced him. That is how, at first and for a long time afterwards, people looked upon the Brothers' habit. But God was now preparing De La Salle to found his society of Brothers. He already had the grace to do so, but he still did not have a plan. The seed in his heart remained hidden even to himself until, to his great astonishment, he would see it rapidly grow into a large tree, spreading its branches everywhere and bringing forth fruit of salvation for the poor, whom the world looks upon as it does the beasts of the fields.

While waiting for this to happen, De La Salle needed to become familiar with the poor and to establish contact with them. He needed to become one of the poor so that he might enrich them. Hence, from this time on he began to visit them assiduously and to bring them generous alms. The time left over from his studies, the Divine Office, and his other exercises of piety was devoted to helping and consoling the poor. They came to him or he went to them. He spoke to them about God, instructed them, prepared them to receive the sacraments, encouraged them to practice patience. While relieving their needs by his charitable alms, he prepared their souls to welcome grace. When he left them, he left behind joy, relief, and true sentiments of piety.

One day his charity brought him to the bedside of a poor sick woman. As he approached her, she vomited all over him. The incident undoubtedly filled the poor soul with confusion, but she saw De La Salle remain perfectly calm, cheerful and gracious. Not only did he refrain from showing any displeasure; he chose to go home bearing the marks of his charity. He did not take off the soiled surplice he had been wearing.

Young as he was, he began to think of sleep as an obstacle to perfection. For this reason he gave his valet orders to awaken him at a fixed time and to insist that he wake up despite his somnolence, thus helping him to win the first battle of the day.

This first skirmish was merely a prelude for others. Mental prayer was another battleground where De La Salle had to vanquish the same powerful enemy. While the fervent young canon put forth his best efforts at lifting his mind to God and uniting it with Him in pure and unruffled contemplation, sleepiness often crept in on him and closed his eyes. When he awoke he felt put out over his weakness and conceived a holy anger against himself. He reproached himself for his failure with all the vehemence that humility suggests to fervent souls.

But what remedy could he apply to this pleasant but treacherous need which overcomes our senses even when the soul wishes to detach itself from them in order to give itself to God? The solution he found was to put sharp pebbles on the kneeler of the prie-dieu where he knelt during prayer, so that the pain they caused him would keep him awake when drowsiness began to overcome him. By this kind of mortification he learned how to overcome an enemy which caused him to do penance for his fault at the very moment when he committed it. Later on, he grew so accustomed to doing without sleep that he often spent whole nights in prayer or in writing his books, or in attending to pressing business concerning his Institute.

To this retrenchment of his sleep he added more rigorous fasts which became excessive during Holy Week. From Holy Thursday until Easter he tried to eat nothing but soup made from herbs. However, having been born with a rather delicate constitution, he found that this privation was beyond his strength. It had such a debilitating effect on him that he was not able to retain anything he ate. For this reason his spiritual director forbade him to continue this practice. His body, however, did not get much relief from this decision because he merely replaced fasting by other mortifications which, without weakening him overmuch, left him only such strength as made them longer and harder to bear. We shall have more to say about his mortifications in treating of his virtues.

At that time, the pious canon had not the least idea of establishing Christian schools nor the slightest inclination to do so. Still, all the decisions he was making were steps leading him to that end. Through events enmeshed with Its designs, Divine Providence was bringing him to the accomplishment of God's will. To follow him on this path where God was leading him, one must recall what was said before (in the "Discourse on the Establishment of Christian Schools") about the upheavals during recent centuries and the help which God afforded His Church in such evil times by raising up a number of illustrious persons remarkable for their holiness and learning, and by the founding of a number of institutes consecrated to the instruction of the people.

Some of these groups concerned themselves with all sorts of persons: city dwellers and country folk, ecclesiastics and lay people. Only one was still wanting: one devoted to the instruction of poor children who did not have the means to attend pay schools. The majority of such children remained in a deplorable ignorance of Christian doctrine and morals. Yet we see every day the evils caused in the world by this ignorance on the part of the common people, truly one of the worst disorders afflicting the Church.

Father Barré, the Minim whose holy life spread his reputation as a saint in Paris and wherever else he lived, was no doubt not the first to recognize this evil and to realize that it was the source of so many others; but he seems to have been the first man in France to seek a remedy for it and to have found one: the establishment of Christian and gratuitous schools. Such a remedy is effective, universal, and sovereign, the only one in fact that puts a stop to the disorders which breed on the ignorance and defective education of the children of the poor. But the establishment of Christian schools presupposes the existence of other institutions devoted to the training of teachers of both

sexes who wish to dedicate themselves to the instruction and sanctification of poor children.

Hence Father Barré's zeal led him to undertake the creation of both these necessary establishments. In view of setting up separate schools for boys and girls, he conceived the project of organizing institutions something like seminaries, destined to train the future teachers who would carry out the Christian and gratuitous instruction of the children of the poor--a noble design, indeed. If Father Barré was not alone in carrying it into effect, he at least deserves credit for having, before anyone else, thought out a plan and for attempting to fulfill it. He succeeded in part. He had the grace to conceive the scheme and to suggest it to others, but not to execute it fully. In Gods' design it was De La Salle who was to receive this grace, so true it is that "one plants and another waters, but God gives the increase," and that according as He wills He "sends workers into His field, to reap what others have sown."

Father Barré did establish training houses for schoolmasters and for school-mistresses. The former seemed to succeed rather well at first, but the success did not last. The teachers either never really assimilated the spirit of their vocation or lost it in a short time. Their fervor was like a straw fire which blazed up for a few moments and then died down. Father Barré's first disciples were not much inclined to accept his lessons on abandonment to Divine Providence, on being satisfied with the strict necessities of life, and on not confusing their interests with God's purposes.

Concerned about their future, they could not help thinking about tomorrow and sought to lay up a sufficiency for themselves so as to be sheltered from indigence. They deserted the schools which the good Father had founded, so that these fell into ruin. Because of this failure he did not try the same plan again. True, several efforts were made to revive these schools later on, but to no purpose. It would have taken candidates ready to enter into the spirit of the founder, a spirit of total disinterestedness and abandonment to Divine Providence. Such people were not forthcoming.

Canon Roland shared the zeal of Father Barré and hoped to enjoy better success with his own project in Rheims. At least he seems to have wanted to try, but death cut short his plans. In him the zealous Minim lost a faithful helper. However, for his consolation Barré's second foundation, the one for girls' schools, succeeded much better. Before dying he had the happiness of seeing the blessings that God granted to his undertaking in Rouen and in Paris, where he had established schools to train pious and zealous women for the instruction and sanctification of girls. This example given by Father Barré proved fruitful, for today the most outstanding prelates seek to establish in their dioceses similar communities working for the same end.

Barré's first attempt at founding an institute for men teachers, an endeavor which did not succeed, was not an idea that disappeared entirely. In the eyes of men it seemed to have failed but not in the sight of God. If the project had not yet proved successful, it was because the man whom God had chosen to realize it had not yet appeared--so true is it that in vain does man build the

house if God does not lay the foundation thereof. In vain do the sentinels keep watch if God does not protect the fortress.

The founder of the Daughters of Providence, Father Roland, and other saintly persons as well, realized how important it was to do for the education of boys what had been done for that of girls. God certainly approved their plans, yet He did not allow them to carry these out. Why not? Because He had reserved the execution of this great work to De La Salle. Although the latter had not thought of that apostolate and had no desire at that time to devote himself to it, still through God's free choice he was to have the honor of creating it. The first group conceived the idea, wanted to bring it about, and neglected nothing to make it succeed; their good will deserved merit before God. Yet all they did came to nothing because God did not act along with them. Here we have one of those mysteries of Divine Providence so frequently met with in the works of God.

Chapter VII

The Hidden Paths by Which Divine Providence Imperceptibly
Brings De La Salle to Carry Out Its Designs.
A Man Is Sent to Rheims to Open Gratuitous Schools.
A Summary of the Admirable Life of
Madame Maillefer, the Lady Who Sent Him.

Since it was Madame Maillefer who began crystallizing the plans of Providence in the life of John Baptist de La Salle, we should look upon her as the first instrument God was pleased to make use of to bring the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools into existence. She deserved the honor of helping such a worthy enterprise see the light of day. Although in sending Adrian Nyel to Rheims to open gratuitous schools she never thought of the possible consequences of her charitable initiative, it still remains true that her zeal envisaged the establishment of an institution devoted to Christian education. Thus she deserves to have a place in the history of the man who was to be the founder of this great work, since she afforded him the first opportunity of taking a direct interest in it.

It is amazing that in the city of Rouen, which can boast of so many learned and brilliant men, no one as yet has thought of honoring her and of edifying the public by recounting the life story of a woman who for so many years gave that city such remarkable examples of heroic virtue. So that these examples may not all be buried in oblivion, we shall set down some of them here, thanks to the testimony of several persons still living who witnessed them along with her townsfolk. Not a great deal is known of her life, but we do know that Madame Jeanne Maillefer was converted when still quite young and before the death of her husband. She did not wait till age had furrowed her cheeks and warned her that the world was not for her nor she for it. Grace called her at a time when she was leading a brilliant existence, when she flattered the world as much as it adulated her.

She was born in Rheims of a wealthy family. She married Pons Maillefer, city comptroller of Rouen, where she took up her residence and lived till her death. In her, everything tended to be extreme, both vices and virtues. Before her conversion she carried vice to excess; after it, virtue. Tall, beautiful, statuesque, she had a noble air, a majestic carriage, an appearance which called for attention and drew all eyes to her. She might have been mistaken for a princess by the way she looked; and she omitted nothing so as to appear such, so great and overbearing was her vanity.

Absorbed more than anyone else by her own person, she used every means to bewitch others. If she did not always succeed in doing so, it was perhaps because the exaggerated efforts she made to appear attractive put people on their guard against her. She was reputed to be the worldliest woman of the city. Always adorned like a goddess, magnificently dressed, appearing with pomp and ostentation, she would stop people in the street and stare them down, especially on feast days and Sundays when she was going to the noon Mass at Notre Dame. She went there more to show off and to make a display of her vanity before the eyes of high society, which likewise worshipped there, and to find admirers than to adore God.

Her pride was satisfied because everywhere she went her ears were flattered by what people said about her. This brought great delight to her heart, so passionately concerned with her reputation. She thrilled when she heard the words whispered by those who happened to meet her: "Look! there goes that gorgeous Madame Maillefer!" Her extravagance knew no limits. Nothing was too elegant, too expensive, too beautiful for her. Eager to discover whatever could enhance her good looks and make her more attractive, she spared neither pains nor money to show herself a complete fashion model for all the latest styles, for the most expensive materials, the most striking clothes, the most arresting combinations, the rarest and costliest hairdos.

Nature had endowed her with great beauty, but in her opinion nature had not done enough for her. Regretting the charms she lacked more than she appreciated those she enjoyed, she sought to make up for what she did not possess by constantly seeking to improve her appearance and by cultivating the laborious and fatiguing art of appearing day after day with new adornments and new clothes. Never was there a woman more totally enslaved by her body or one who worshipped her own person more devoutly. Her self-love, so ingenious in finding ways to satisfy itself, had suggested to her the idea of having a statue of herself made.

This sort of life-sized idol, shaped exactly like her, was the mannequin on which her vanity practiced. She used it to try on the various articles of clothing and other ornaments she planned to wear. She dressed this mannequin, arranged it as she herself wished to appear, and exhausted on it all the possible and imaginable refinements of her worldly spirit in the hope that they would show her off to better advantage. For her own misfortune, and for that of others too, she succeeded only too well. Naturally, she did not go to all this trouble in order to remain hidden but to show off everywhere and every day, whether at social dances or the theater, at the opera or out driving, or in the visits she paid.

Thus vanity led her captive everywhere she went and made a spectacle of her all over the city. She tried her hardest to appear as the only real beauty in Rouen and to eclipse all other women. It was no fault of hers if people did not pay her homage as though she were indeed a queen. She acted so much like one that Madame Louvet, her friend, called her "My Queen!" even after her conversion, to remind her of the imposing and majestic air which she had so carefully cultivated and of the sumptuous attire she was in the habit of wearing to add to the illusion.

Her laziness was on a par with her vanity. She never rose before eleven in the morning. She bragged about this by saying that such a long night's rest kept her ideas fresh. Winter and summer she drank only iced drinks. Earth, sky, and sea contained nothing too exotic for her palate. In all the marketplaces servants sought out the choicest viands, the tastiest fruit for her table. Nothing was too expensive; as long as it was unusual and delicious she bought it, whatever the price.

As one might expect, her lack of pity for the poor was on a par with her exquisite concern for her own body. The following occurrence, which is believed to have been the occasion for her conversion, gives us a sad yet striking example of her attitude towards the unfortunate.

One day a beggar, ill and obviously in an extremely wretched condition, came to her home hoping to find something to eat and a place to rest a little. The coachman, a pious and charitable man, filled with compassion for this miserable wretch, went to ask his mistress if they could let the beggar in. Such an act of charity, so appropriate for one so much in need, did not appeal to a woman as worldly as she was, one who loved nobody but herself. We know how cruel selfishness makes people; it is the greatest enemy of real charity. A heart filled with pride and sensuality is a hard, unfeeling heart, inaccessible to pity for the poor.

Madame Maillefer with scorn and indignation rejected the charitable request of her servant and told him to shut the door to the beggar who merely wanted some place to rest. Because the coachman could not bring himself to do this, he let the man into the stable and did what he could to help him. What a surprise it was when next day he found him dead on the miserable bed where he had lain! The news of this unfortunate occurrence spread throughout the house and did not take long to reach the mistress' ears. After venting her wrath on the charitable coachman and overwhelming him with a torrent of insults and abuse, she dismissed him immediately and told him never to come back. The other servants insisted that something must be done to remove the corpse. Finally, Madame Maillefer sent them a sheet in which to enshroud the body for burial.

That evening, however, she found that same sheet on a table. It seemed as though the beggar whom she had refused to welcome had turned down her gift so ungraciously given. As she unfolded the sheet, she recognized it. Thinking that the poor wretch who had died in her stable was still there and had not yet been buried, she fell into a rage and gave full rein to her exasperation. But the words died on her lips and her blood ran cold when she learned that the

corpse had indeed been buried, wrapped in the same sheet, and that nobody had put the sheet on the table where she had found it.

This was the moment God had been waiting for, when His mercy, not His justice, confronted her. Surprised, moved, frightened, she burst into sighs, groans, and sobs. On entering this hardened heart, grace softened it, melted it like wax brought near a raging fire. She had been a sinner; now she was a penitent. Such had Madame Maillefer been when she lived a worldly life; here is what she became once she resolved to change her life.

Three vices had ruled her: vanity, laziness, and hard-heartedness towards the unfortunate. The three contrary virtues of humility, mortification, and charity for the poor now became characteristic of her. Luxury and display in dress, preoccupation with finery, the desire of showing off and attracting attention had been the passions which had nourished her vanity. Grace led her to resist these tendencies by assuming a careless, unkempt and disheveled external appearance. She affected ridiculous mannerisms, foolish behavior, and adopted the practice of a poor and retired life. Formerly her body had grown soft in laziness; previously she did not get up until the sun had almost reached its zenith. She could not find anything exquisite enough to satisfy her sensuality. Now the Spirit of God, to make amends for all this, was going to inspire her to practice forms of mortification which can scarcely be believed.

Finally, to expiate her hard-heartedness towards the poor, she resolved to spend the rest of her life serving them in the most humble and most disagreeable tasks that heroic charity can undertake. Grace always goes against nature. After grace initiated her conversion by the event which we have related, it urged her to make a prompt and striking break with the world and to expiate her love of ostentation by acts of public humiliation.

Vanity had been her pet passion; now love of abjection became her dominant attraction and led her to those pious exaggerations which we admire in the lives of the saints and which human judgment might be tempted to criticize if the Spirit of God did not seem to have inspired them. Like Mary Magdalen, no sooner had Madame Maillefer resolved to change her life than she decided to show her disdain for the world. Understanding so well its emptiness, she thought of how she might expiate the vanity she had displayed in her past life. She wanted to make up for the scandal she had given by an apparent act of folly which would make the world think that in turning her back on it she had taken leave of her senses.

One evening she let herself be shut up in the church and spent the night there in prayer. Her husband sent out search parties for her but to no avail. The search only served to publicize her disappearance and to convince everybody that Madame Maillefer's new-found devotion was unsettling her reason. The world, which is too prone to judge unfavorably of devout persons, had ample matter to further confirm it in its opinions when it learned that without taking off her splendid dress she had put on over it a serving-maid's soiled apron made of cheap cloth. Thus accoutered she attended high Mass one Sunday in her parish church. This action resulted in all the notoriety she expected, making her the laughing-stock of the city.

Day after day she became the butt of ridicule. After having for so long been a worldly woman, she soon acquired the reputation of being a ridiculous and bizarre fanatic. Her husband could not long remain ignorant of the happenings which were stirring up so much gossip in the city, and he had too much at stake not to oppose the pious exaggerations in the practice of humility to which he saw his wife inclined. Invoking his authority, he forbade her to indulge in such practices any more. Her thirst for abjection was so strong that she needed this limitation placed on her. Constantly urged on by the Spirit of God to mortify her vanity still further by humiliations on a par with the faults she had previously committed, she seemed as eager to court disdain now as she had been to enjoy honors and glory.

Charity grew stronger day by day in her heart and gradually replaced self-love, demanding greater sacrifices for God than she had previously made for the world. Although we do not know too much about the details of her life immediately after her conversion and while she remained under her husband's authority, still, judging the beginning by what happened later, we know that like another Magdalen when she turned aside from sinning, she became a great penitent. The moment she gave up vanity she entered upon the path of perfection and made giant strides therein.

Nothing held her back--neither the world nor her body nor her friends. She courageously broke all these bonds and did so all at once. She did not seem to care what people might say or think about her. Never again did she worry about the world; she wished only to be despised by it. She thought of her body only to crucify it; of her vanity-filled life only to expiate it by sacrifices which made her self-love bleed. No more was she seen in worldly circles or at public amusements; she appeared only in church at the foot of the crucifix.

Rare and succulent viands were banished from her table. She cut back on all foolish and superfluous spending. The money thus saved was spent on the poor, for whom her present tenderness equalled her previous insensitivity towards their needs. After doing away with her luxurious way of life and her elegant table, she regulated her hours of sleep and condemned herself to rise every day at an early hour. Everything else in her life and in her person showed the sincerity of her conversion. She thenceforth led a strictly regulated life, a life of prayer and retirement--in a word, a truly Christian life.

To begin with, she forbade herself all fancy clothes, elaborate gowns, and showy adornments. From simple attire she went to dresses that were very common, from these to ones which were shabby, to a garb that made her look ridiculous. In this way she pursued the spirit of vanity to its last refuge, and for as long as she lived she sought to mortify it in its slightest manifestations. Thus it would seem that the Spirit of God followed the example of the spirit of the world which had inspired her. He took pleasure in presenting her to the public in His turn as a sort of curiosity. Nearly every month she appeared in a different state of abasement, dressed in a fashion which she had concocted on purpose to draw down mockery on herself.

If while her husband lived she could not satisfy as fully as she would have liked this grace-inspired inclination, once he was dead she felt free to follow it as far as she liked. Being the mistress of her person, her actions and her wealth, she set no limits to her charity or to her humiliations and penances. We do not know exactly when she lost her husband nor the length of time they had lived together. It would seem that he was a true gentleman, for he and she together founded the school at Darnétal. Perhaps when she was converted she converted him too; or perhaps, good Christian that he was, he had not been as worldly-minded as she.

Their only son married a girl from Rheims and does not seem to have lived very long after his father's death. His widow, who rivaled her mother-in-law in piety, lived in Rheims as Madame Maillefer lived in Rouen. She served as a model for the city. Both of them, after giving outstanding examples of the most eminent virtue, were to die in the odor of sanctity.

When Madame Maillefer found herself freed from all the constraints which might have held her back on the path of perfection, she gave herself over without reserve to the inspiration of the Spirit which powerfully incited her to practice humility, mortification, and charity. Loving a poor, abject and despised life, a hidden and obscure existence, she gave an outstanding example of virtue during fifteen years and led a life which at first won for her the reputation of being mad but later that of being a saint.

After her husband's death the first thing she did to make herself look ridiculous was to have a dress prepared out of pieces of cloth of various colors. To be certain it came out the way she wanted, she called in a seamstress whom she knew, a virtuous woman; and having given her a whole basketful of strips and scraps of cloth, she asked her to sew them together and to make her a dress. Fearing that the woman might be confused by this request, she prevailed on her to stay in the house and in the room, under lock and key, until she finished.

Madame Maillefer then took the key and, after making arrangements for all the seamstress' needs, went off to spend the day in church and at the hospital, returning only at nightfall to deliver her prisoner. So as to have a complete costume to go with her new skirt, she had some blouses made of such coarse material that wearing them was like wearing a hairshirt. She obtained workmen's shoes, which had no soles to them; coarse stockings, all patched; and a sash that fitted the rest. In those days ladies wore velvet sashes lined with tafeta; hers was made of black cloth lined with whatever she could find.

When this costume satisfied the state of mind which had inspired it, she put it on and went to Notre Dame Cathedral to show herself off before the eyes of all the high society people. How often had she not gone there to bedazzle everybody by the splendor of her apparel! This huge church, which at noon Mass on Sundays and feasts was filled by the laziest and worldliest people in Rouen, had been the stage where she had paraded her vanity. It was only right that it should now become the showplace for her ignominy.

That was what she went looking for, on those same days and times, clad in such a way as to make her the laughing-stock of all. She did not try to pass

unperceived. The seats in the front of the church which she had profaned by her pride and which she had purposely chosen so that everyone could see and admire her were the ones she now occupied, kneeling, robed in her clownish attire, and carrying a big thorn branch on her shoulder.

It is easy to imagine the jeers she endured throughout the city by such shocking and unexpected behavior. They won for her the satisfaction of drinking deep of the chalice of humiliation that the Son of God had drunk; but still she never succeeded in quenching the thirst for contumely that she experienced. She longed to be mocked, despised, blamed, condemned; and she received what she wanted. Nothing else was talked about, and those who talked also laughed at her and made fun of her. If in the end the world grew tired of criticizing her, it was because people considered her to be out of her mind.

Her director, Father du Tac, did not approve of all this extravagant behavior and ordered her to dress in a more conventional way. She obeyed, but with the greatest reluctance. Her obedience lasted only as long as she did not recall her past vanity. When she remembered her former luxury, the splendid clothes, the pearl necklaces costing over 500 écus that she had worn to flatter the world and to please herself, she could no longer master her feelings. The reproaches of her conscience threw her into a holy fury against herself. Her memory represented to her all this ostentation as a crime for which she could not forgive herself. To make amends to God she would again go out in attire that was pitiful to behold.

Madame Maillefer went so far in her desire to disparage herself that to mortify the daintiness proper to her sex and state she let her nails grow long and would not wash her hands even before eating, no matter how filthy they were as a result of the attentions she had been giving to the sick. Her poor seamstress felt her stomach turn and had to call upon all her virtue merely to look at the woman who, when she had followed the inclinations of nature, had been the most exquisitely turned out and the most meticulously clean person in the whole city, and who now had become by choice and through yielding to grace the most repulsive creature one could meet.

She went through the streets accoutered as we have described, with her big thorn staff in one hand and an old book in the other, reciting the Penitential Psalms in a loud voice. That was how she would travel all the way to Darnétal, except that sometimes she carried a crucifix in her hand. Everywhere she showed herself a true penitent whose heart was contrite and humbled, one who found that every place and time was appropriate to bewail her sins. Her attitude, her gestures, all her exterior appearance, unkempt and dishevelled, showed that she thought only of her shame at having offended God's infinite majesty and of how she might vindicate God's honor at the expense of her own.

When she needed water she went to fetch it from the public fountain and waited for her turn to draw what she wanted. Often enough she replaced her black cloth sash by a scrap of carpet which she threw over shoulder. When people said something to humiliate or insult her, she was happy; then she started reciting the "Te Deum" or the sacred canticle "Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus" with a joy which betokened her triumph over her self-esteem.

She took pleasure in going to the marketplace to buy a quarter-pound of butter, which she brought back home wrapped in a cabbage leaf and lying on her outstretched hand in such a way that it could not pass unnoticed. She carried some sticks under the other arm. In doing this her purpose was either to make people mock her, or to seem poor, and to draw down upon herself, by appearing so poor, the disdain which always dogs the steps of poverty. This stratagem to win humiliations, however, did not always succeed as she hoped; in spite of herself, her noble bearing, commanding appearance and majestic air set her off from the rest and made it clear to anyone who did not know her what sort of person she really was. Then she could no longer place limits on her thirst of abasement. It had become an art which she possessed to perfection, for she never ceased practicing it.

Her days were filled with continual and successive humiliations; by that assiduous cultivation she acquired such a habit of humility that she seemed to have grown familiar with contempt. Unceasingly occupied with finding ways of drawing down scorn on herself, she offered the world new reasons to make fun of her. Thus the days and years of her widowhood were marked by surprising traits of humility. In this connection stories are told about her which seem exaggerated to those who know nothing of the way the Holy Spirit guides souls and the sublime paths to perfection into which He leads souls docile to Him.

One day when she had gone down to the marketplace a fishwife recognized her and, pointing to her, cried out, "There she is, the one who used to give us such good business when she bought the finest and most expensive fish for her table." Touched, and moved to compassion at the sight of the poor and ignominious appearance of a lady once so high and mighty in her splendid clothes and her rich apparel, the fishwife got up and presented Madame Maillefer with a small coin which the latter gratefully accepted.

Those who did not know who she was readily made the mistake of thinking that she was some beggar-woman who needed alms and was looking for assistance. It happened occasionally that someone offered her something in charity, and such an alms she accepted as a gift very apt to mortify her self-love. One day she received a coin as she stood among a group of poor people with whom she loved to mingle, trying to appear as one of them and thus to share the disgrace of beggarhood. She had to pay dearly for that tiny alms because those with whom she stood, whether from envy or because they thought she had come there to compete with them for alms, began to insult her and added blows to their invectives. As that was what she had come to seek, she accepted the ill-treatment with composure. Such a happening she considered a fortunate one.

Nor was that enough to satisfy the Holy Spirit Who took delight in contradicting in every detail the vanity which had led her astray and in helping her make up for it entirely by causing her to endure the most cutting humiliations. Docile to the inspiration of grace, Madame Maillefer often knelt immobile on the stone floor of the church of Saint Nicaise, in the contrite and humble posture and attitude of the publican, in a spot where everybody had to pass, and where she was shoved and almost trampled upon. She allowed nothing to distract her.

What did she not make use of to demean herself in the eyes of the world and to cause the public to despise her! Her holy desire for humiliation made her betake herself here and there to reap the harvest of derision and the insults she could find in public. Her thirst for opprobrium gave her no rest and could be satisfied only when she saw herself the object of laughter and mockery.

She traversed the streets, asking those whom she met to heap scorn and outrage on her. Sometimes she achieved her purpose by carrying a lighted lantern in broad daylight so that they would think she was a lunatic; sometimes by walking in the mud; sometimes by appearing in public clad in soiled and filthy apparel; sometimes by wearing shoes, stockings, and skirts full of mud, which she did not allow anybody to remove; sometimes by prostrating herself before the wayside crosses, no matter how muddy the ground in front of them was, and by remaining there in prayer for a considerable time.

What did the faithful think? What could they think of a lady whom all had seen so radiantly beautiful, so sumptuously clad, so richly adorned? Of a lady who had studied so diligently the means of setting off to best advantage her figure and her lovely face? Of one who had followed the latest styles and used the most worldly adornments? "She is insane; she has lost her mind; too much devotion has ruined her judgment." Such was what everyone was saying. The very street urchins hooted after her and ran behind her yelling, "There goes the crazy lady!" They all laughed at her because the sight of her provoked either embarrassment or pity.

On such occasions the lady seemed to be in her element. The world was giving her what she wanted, and she was satisfied. Those pious persons who remained her friends and who were not ashamed to be known as such remonstrated with her for wearing such bizarre and ridiculous attire and tried to tell her that in conscience she ought not to provide the public with so many motives to jeer at her and to give evil tongues an occasion to speak ill of true piety; but she silenced them with the words, "We must do nothing to please the world; the wisdom of men is folly with God; and what seems like folly to men is wisdom before God."

Her love for abjection brought her wherever she thought there might be any humiliation to be experienced and obliged her not only to mingle with the poor on the steps of the most frequented churches but also to pretend to be one of them so that she could seem to be a beggar too and thus be exposed to the ignominy of beggarhood. Consumed by the desire to be humiliated, she pretended to be the poorest of the poor. She searched herself for vermin, which she would feign to kill so as to be freed from their infestation. She would pull out of her clothing some old strip of cloth or a piece of filthy linen which she picked over carefully in the sight of all to get the lice out. The fact was that she was indeed overrun with lice because she no longer wore under-clothing and because she had begun to live in such close contact with the poor.

After she finished her penitential practices, she would spend her time caring for the poor. How many other heroic deeds inspired by a humility which

sought to earn the derision of men would not the story of her life have preserved for the edification of the faithful if someone had only taken pains to gather all this information after her death!

She abandoned herself to her love of abjection with such wholehearted zest that her director, Father du Tac, who had a reputation for deep spirituality and who gave public proof of this, was sometimes embarrassed by her and blushed on her account. He frequently reproached her for what she was doing; but the humble lady simply answered that she was only practicing what he had taught her, and she added that if he thought she was going too far on this score, he should speak less vehemently about humility in the pulpit. She also asked him if what he preached was not to be practiced and whether she should refrain from seeking abjection when he tried to inspire her to desire it.

"If the Holy Spirit makes me understand by your teaching," she said, "the hidden treasures contained in humiliations, must your lips forbid me to put into practice the lessons they give me? Either refrain from saying in your sermons what you do not want me to practice, or let me do what you tell me. If one must humble himself in order to become humble, and if humility is necessary for salvation, do not hinder me in the exercise of a virtue that the Holy Spirit inspires me to practice to expiate my past vanity and to make up in public for the scandal I have given."

Finally, to complete the portrait of her humility we must add that she became as attached to a hidden and obscure way of life as she had once been to a life of display and ostentation. She detested praise and shrank from it with horror; she avoided people who tried to praise her. One day, she mentioned to Mademoiselle de Monville that she would like to live near her, and the latter told her that she would be delighted, as she hoped to profit by the virtuous example she would see. The humble Madame Maillefer was so upset by this gracious reply that rather than going to stay with Mademoiselle de Monville, she henceforth avoided her at all costs.

Because a similar compliment was paid her one day by some other pious persons whom she had gone to see, she never visited them again. "I intend," she had told them, "to rent a room in this neighborhood." "We would be delighted," they replied, "because you would draw down God's blessing on the entire quarter." These words offended the humble servant of God to such a degree that she left immediately and never went back to see these persons. To be considered her friend, one had to feign to disdain her. Next to insults and ill-treatment, the greatest service one could render her was to ignore and forget her, for she desired only to be unknown and hidden, even as the dead are in their tombs.

This holy and powerful inclination for scorn and for being forgotten was not a mere passing grace in her life. It was the habitual and dominant attraction of her heart, and it showed itself in her death even as it had during her life. In her last illness she tried to hide the graces God was giving her, to veil her inner life under the appearance of a fatuous air and of a stolid silence which foiled all attempts at penetrating her secret.

It was in vain that those near her tried to draw from her some signs of that eminent virtue which so often during her life she had betrayed without willing to do so and which had shone out so brightly amidst her apparent folly. She strove to let nothing appear in herself but what she wanted people to see: lack of understanding, defects, failure in virtue, real poverty, stupidity and obtuseness regarding the things of God.

So that after her death she might be, even more than during her life, forgotten and undistinguished among the unnamed poor, she wished to be buried among the paupers in the cemetery of Saint Nicaise, her parish church. However, since virtue, like fire, makes its presence felt, and the more one tries to conceal it the more it becomes manifest, so too the manner of her dying, as we shall see, furnished proof of her eminent sanctity.

Humility was not the only virtue dear to her heart; poverty, penance and charity also held sway over it. Because she cherished poverty even more than she had once sought luxury and splendor, she got rid of nearly everything she owned. Having become more considerate of the poor in proportion as she had once shown herself unfeeling in their regard, she thought of her possessions only when she remembered that she could use them to do good to the less fortunate. Once she became a widow she really owned nothing as her own, nothing that she did not devote to works of mercy.

Everywhere and in everything she showed signs of effective poverty. Her dwelling, her dress, her food, all bore the imprint of this virtue. This is really not saying enough; for after the death of her husband her lodging, furniture, clothes and food were of such poor quality that they could only inspire nausea. A miserable room was enough for her. She had two or three earthenware dishes, a little straw to sleep on and a ragged blanket to keep her warm. All of it was pitiful to see and really good only to be thrown out on the trash heap. If someone had indeed pitched it all out of the window, the poorest beggar in town would not have bothered to pick it up.

She preferred the company of the poor. Her ambition was to find a place among them, to resemble them, and to live like them. She succeeded for she possessed the talent of appearing poor, thanks to her ingenious humility, and that of becoming poor, thanks to her liberal charity. She was as clever in disguising her alms as she was generous in bestowing them. Sometimes she would buy meat and bring it to the home of some poor people to have it cooked, then she would "forget" it there; or she would take some of the juice and mix it with water to constitute a sort of soup which she ate from a wooden bowl while standing in the street like a beggar so that the passers-by would think she was indeed a pauper being fed out of charity.

When she went to visit the school she had founded at Darnetal, her zeal made her go from house to house exhorting parents to send their children to catechism. She entered shops and urged the workers and customers to frequent the sacraments; then she knelt down and showed them by her devout and recollected attitude how they should receive Communion.

The austere, poor and simple life she led enabled her to use all her income for the benefit of the poor. As fast as money reached her hands, she spent it for the indigent. Her charity was tailored to fit their needs. Knowing as she did in detail what their sufferings were, she knew what she should do with her alms. Since the way she distributed her charity did not always satisfy the cupidity of bogus paupers, it happened not infrequently that her liberality was rewarded by insults.

Once a woman, displeased because Madame Maillefer had not given her all the money she wanted to buy some wool, tried to have her revenge by speaking of her in a satirical and derisive manner. But that was to do the servant of God a great favor, one for which she wished to show her gratitude. "I love you more than all the rest," she exclaimed, and then gave that insolent person all the money she had asked for.

At that time Mass was said every first Wednesday of the month in a chapel built on Saint Catherine's Hill where many people went to satisfy their devotion. Madame Maillefer's piety was even stronger. Every Wednesday she made this tiring pilgrimage. Sometimes she spent whole hours in prayer, whatever the weather, kneeling at the door of this chapel when it was not open. When she visited the Carmelites, she heard all the Masses said in the chapel and left only at a late hour.

She usually attended Matins in her parish church every Sunday and feast day, and during the time she seemed entirely taken up with the remembrance of her sins and consumed with a desire to offer God reparation for them, for she could be heard repeating the words: "Create a clean heart in me, O God; cast me not far from Thee, turn aside Thy gaze from my sins."

After her husband's death, her life was one long martyrdom of penance. She almost never warmed herself. She endured heat and cold and the other unpleasantnesses of the weather as though she had no body or had lost all feeling. At first she used heavy, common material for her blouses; then she gave up wearing them entirely, so that when she died hardly any underclothing was found in her room. She went about barefooted, but it was not easy to notice this for she wore shoes without any soles.

She was a robust person who enjoyed a good appetite, and it was fortunate that she did, for she ate things that an ordinary person could not even have looked at without nausea. What was her food like? Soup and vegetables, which had been cooked for several days and in which maggots often teemed. Such food did not seem to bother her; she ate everything and seemingly with great gusto, whereas the people who sometimes watched could not bear the sight of such food. Sister Marie Anne and her companion from Darnétal had come to visit Madame Maillefer one day when there was no school. They began to straighten out her room, which was always very disorderly. What was their amazement when they found worms swimming around in her soup!

No doubt she had not reached such a degree of mortification without having done violence to herself in extraordinary ways. A woman born to opulence,

raised delicately, as sensual as she was worldly, a worshipper of her own body, she must have had to undergo terrible struggles to overcome her sensuality and love of ease. The victories she had won over her fastidiousness must have been frequent and bloody ones for a body grown soft in indulgence. What sacrifices must it not have cost her nature which had been accustomed to refusing itself nothing, before she could bring herself not, like the Prodigal Son, to desire the leftovers thrown to pigs, but to eat what the worms had not consumed and even the worms themselves! Could she not say with Job, and with as much reason as he, "What my soul could not have beheld without horror has become my food."

Indeed, Madame Maillefer had more than one reason to live as she did. All the virtues grew stronger by her way of life. Poverty, charity for the poor, silence, recollection and mental prayer all thrived, thanks to a lifestyle which required no servants and no lodging but her little room. All alone in this hole in the wall to which a shaky stairway led, she needed little time or effort to prepare her food. She had neither a clothespress nor trunk nor other furniture; she slept on a bit of straw on the floor or on an old carpenter's trestle. Her only valuable possession, according to the neighbors, was a "Lives of the Saints" text which during part of the night furnished her material for reading and for her prayers.

Ordinarily she spent her time either at the Cathedral of Notre Dame or at the hospital of Saint Mary Magdalen, where, to expiate her former hardness of heart toward the poor, she rendered them the humblest and most mortifying services.

This refuge of human misery and infirmity was the place she enjoyed the most. She stayed there much longer than in her house where she merely spent the night and prayed in secret. Early in the morning she would leave her room, whatever the weather, to take up again her round of pious and charitable activities.

She particularly liked to console and exhort the sick, especially the dying; and this she did with singular effectiveness. No one could hear her without being touched. The sick beggars, whom she loved most tenderly, especially seemed delighted to hear her and thought an angel was speaking to them when she exhorted them. If one of them mentioned that he needed a remedy to aid him, she tried at once to satisfy him, even going all across town to get it if this was necessary--and it frequently was. If there were more sick people than usual, she spent the whole day caring for them. To have more time she would bring her sorry lunch with her and eat it on the hospital steps.

Nothing prevented her from going to serve the sick paupers. The only concession she ever made to herself was to buy a broom so as to clear the snow from the streets when winter had made them all but impassable. This gave people another reason to laugh at her. But after treating her as a lunatic for fifteen years, people began to look upon her as a saint. After having for so long put her patience to the test, they began to see in her perseverance a proof of real holiness.

Towards the end of her life she had come to a sort of boardinghouse near Notre Dame where she was provided with food and drink so that she could have more time to pray before the image of the Most Blessed Virgin which is at the altar of the vows. There she spent several hours every day. She also wanted to have more time to care for the sick and dying. Only at nightfall did she return to her poor little room in Saint Nicaise's parish.

The year 1693, so disastrous on account of the famine and pestilence which desolated France, furnished Madame Maillefer with the occasion of renewing her fervor. But the price she paid was her life. The hospital of Saint Mary Magdalen was filled with people ill with purpura, which was raging in Rouen as it was everywhere. The dead and dying provided a new field for heroic acts of charity on the part of the pious lady.

Unconcerned and indifferent to the danger to which she was exposing herself, and concerned only with relieving suffering, aiding those in their agony, and burying the dead, she ceased her zealous efforts only at nightfall. Weary and worn out, she often left the hospital only at ten at night, less to go and rest than to pray. In the practice of such heroic charity she found the death which was its reward and thus she crowned her holy life by a death truly precious in the eyes of the Lord.

While taking care of the sick and the dying, she contracted their illness. She felt herself grow violently ill and understood that her last hour had come. As ill herself as the patients she was caring for, she told them farewell and declared that she would not see them any more, that she would not again have the consolation of relieving their sufferings or of burying the dead. She died, in fact, just a few days later in an ecstasy of love, stretched out on the floor in her poor room with arms outstretched and eyes raised to heaven. She closed her saintly life with the words, "My God, I am coming to You!"

The Superioress of the hospital, who had come with a companion to assist her, went home as full of admiration for her death as she had been for her life. Father Le Paon, later pastor of Saint Nicaise, who gave her the Last Sacraments, returned home so impressed and consoled that he could only exclaim, "What a beautiful death! What a happy death! Blessed are those who die like her!"

Everyone wanted to have a souvenir of her, for the reputation of holiness which she had acquired made people consider as real relics whatever had belonged to her. That pious desire found little to satisfy itself with, however, for at her death the lady left neither money nor furniture nor clothes that could be divided. A few rags full of vermin, fit only to burn, were all she left behind. They did take snips of her hair which were distributed widely and preserved carefully.

Such is the portrait of the celebrated Madame Maillefer who in her day was so much spoken about, for good and for evil, in the city of Rouen, and who after having been the town scandal became its paragon of virtue. From being a notorious worldling she became an illustrious penitent. By many years spent in daily humiliations, in the practice of the most repugnant mortifications, in

the constant exercise of the most heroic works of mercy, she expiated the early years of her life which had been given over to the most extravagant luxury, to an easy and sensual life, and to the satisfaction of her unbridled vanity.

She is still remembered in Rouen, where she died some forty years ago.* A large number of the faithful still live who can remember seeing her; some knew her, and several witnessed the facts which we have related here. Even today many speak of her with amazement and sincere admiration. What we have related above is mostly the testimony of Mademoiselle Monville, an aunt of Monsieur Monville, a president of magistrates, now eighty-five years old, who knew Madame Maillefer very well since both of them had the same spiritual director; and also of Sister Marie Anne of Darnétal, whom Madame Maillefer sent to that village as a schoolmistress and who still lives there; and of various other persons who saw and knew her.

As Madame Maillefer was interested in all good works, she was one of the first to support the zeal of Father Barré when he began establishing Christian schools. She founded one for girls in Darnétal, a large village close to Rouen, a commercial and manufacturing center with a considerable population. The success of that school encouraged the founding of similar ones elsewhere for the education of girls and of boys. In the following manner Divine Providence brought De La Salle to undertake the carrying out of this design.

Madame Maillefer was inspired to provide for the poor children in her native city the same benefits that she had afforded those at Darnétal. She therefore made arrangements with Canon Roland, whom she trusted implicitly and who shared her deep piety, to set about starting schools for boys there. It was not necessary to provide for the girls, since Roland, as early as 1674, had founded for their instruction the community of Sisters which we have already mentioned.

The great good done for the girls in this new establishment led Canon Roland and Madame Maillefer to entertain a great desire to establish something similar for the boys. In 1673 the two of them had laid plans aimed at bringing this about, but these had been frustrated by the death of Canon Roland. The generous benefactress did not let his death deter her; hoping against hope, she resolved to revive the project which, although she did not suspect it, would give rise to the founding of the Brothers' Institute.

Since Father Roland could no longer help her, she was inspired to try to find someone else in Rheims who might replace him. The enterprise was a delicate and difficult one. The opposition which the institution of the schools for girls had encountered in Rheims made it clear that the project of something similar for boys would run into the same heavy weather. Consequently, to bring it off called for a man who was zealous and adroit, supple and persuasive.

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*Madame Maillefer died in the plague of 1693-94. Blain was writing some time before 1733, the date of publication of this Life.

Madame Maillefer thought she had found such a man in Adrian Nyel, a native of Laon, who at this time was about fifty-five years old. Nature had given him the talents needed for this sort of undertaking. Lively and restless by temperament, he was always ready to break new trails and to attempt new projects. Nor was he inexperienced in the type of work that Madame Maillefer thought he could successfully establish. He had begun in Rouen, where he had started some successful gratuitous schools for boys and had had much to do with their growth. To provide for his living expenses and those of a fourteen-year-old boy who would accompany him to Rheims, Madame Maillefer had undertaken to furnish them 100 écus a year and had given him a written promise to this effect.

With this assurance, Adrian Nyel left for Rheims in 1679 with his little traveling companion. He had been properly rehearsed regarding the intentions of his benefactress and carried letters from her addressed to the Superioress of the Sisters of the Child Jesus, who was aware of this project which she had discussed with Canon Roland when he was still alive. This Sister knew Nyel, for she had lived in Rouen and had served as the Superioress of the Sisters of Providence there. Now she was directing the new community founded by Father Roland, to whom Father Barré had sent her.

Divine Providence, which controls events so as to bring about its own ends, saw to it that Father De La Salle happened to be entering the Sisters' convent just as Adrian Nyel and his boy arrived there. Providence intended to introduce to De La Salle this stranger who would be the instrument for the establishment of Christian and gratuitous schools for boys. Nothing, however, was further from De La Salle's thoughts. He would have been very much surprised had anyone told him that this stranger, so casually met, was an envoy from God sent to lead him to the accomplishment of His eternal designs.

On his side, Nyel had indeed come to open Christian and gratuitous schools; but his aims went no farther. He had not the slightest suspicion that he was about to lay the foundation of a great edifice and to prepare the way for the establishment of a new order. I am not at all sure whether he would have consented to be a part of such an enterprise if anyone had shown him the final outcome of his journey to Rheims, for he personally had neither the inclination for religious life nor the grace to embrace it. He was not really suited for this type of work, as the sequel was to show. He was, then, merely the providential instrument for getting the undertaking started. Once it was under way, Adrian Nyel, who brought De La Salle into it, moved on, leaving the young canon alone to carry out God's purposes.

Chapter VIII

The Opening of Christian and Gratuitous Schools for Boys in Rheims

Adrian Nyel had reached Rheims and was still knocking at the door of the Sisters' convent when De La Salle also arrived there. They saw each other for the first time but did not speak, like people who are not acquainted and who do not even surmise the relationship they will eventually establish with one another. Once admitted, Nyel, after the usual compliments, explained to the Superioress the reason for his visit and gave her the letter Madame Maillefer had written. De La Salle was not present at this meeting. On entering the house he had let the stranger, of whose mission and its motive he had no inkling, free to confer with the Superioress. What could she reply? True, Nyel was no stranger to her; but his project, although planned while Canon Roland was still alive, seemed to her something unusual and daring and its success very problematical.

However, it was not up to Sister to object or to give advice. The man who could resolve all difficulties was in the convent. Without knowing it, Nyel had met him at the door. He was the one who should be consulted and who could advise them. The Superioress sent for De La Salle and begged him to give them the benefit of his counsel. Among the letters from Madame Maillefer which Nyel had brought with him, there was one addressed to John Baptist, her cousin. In this letter she begged him to use his influence to help Nyel and her to set up in Rheims a foundation for the Christian and gratuitous education of poor boys.

De La Salle read Madame Maillefer's letter and listened to Nyel explain his project. He realized how important and necessary it was and the advantages it would offer. He wanted it to succeed, but he foresaw the difficulties involved and the problems that would arise.

Canon Roland's hopes would have been fulfilled to the highest extent if he had lived to see his project executed, but death had not allowed him to do so. Hence it was, so to speak, a sort of duty for De La Salle to promote the undertaking. He felt he owed this to the memory of his dead friend, and the natural goodness of his heart did not permit him to refuse his cooperation. In addition, nobody was suggesting that he undertake the task himself, still less assume responsibility for it; things had not yet reached that point. If De La Salle had thought they would eventually reach it, he would have chosen not to get involved at all, so little was he attracted by the idea. He did not object to the work itself, which he considered excellent, but he would have objected to becoming its promoter and sponsor.

De La Salle, not aware that he was assuming any special obligation, charitably offered to help Nyel in any way he could. He praised his zeal and applauded his initiative. Generously putting aside all human views and his own private opinion that there was not much chance for the plan to succeed, he offered to do what he could to resolve the initial difficulties.

The first of these, which could have led to many others, was to find a suitable place for Nyel to stay while arranging for the opening of his school. This first step was a slippery one. Too many precautions could not be taken to make it safe and to insure that it would not lead to a fiasco. Secrecy was not less necessary, for when a scheme is publicized too early it often fails to materialize.

It was, then, necessary to veil this project in silence. The least suspicion that might have been aroused would have sufficed to ruin it, especially in a town where there was so much prejudice against new establishments and where the ill-feeling aroused over the institution of the school Sisters had as yet barely subsided. If it were noised abroad that Adrian Nyel had come as a schoolmaster for the purpose of opening gratuitous schools, he would have found every door closed against him--or rather, wide open to make him leave again.

Now the instructions that Nyel had received from Madame Maillefer to lodge at her brother's house would have divulged the plan. De La Salle, enlightened by his usual prudence or perhaps by an illumination from on high, realized this possibility and advised against his staying with Madame Maillefer's brother. "In vain," he told Nyel, "would you have come so far to open Christian and gratuitous schools in Rheims if your steps took you to the house of your benefactress' brother. If you go there you declare your intentions; and if you do so you will cause the entire project to fail. Will not your stay in that house lead everyone to guess why you have come?"

"Your social rank, your state in life, and your type of work are entirely different from those of your host. People will ask what brings you to him and what can be the reason for your coming. They will talk about it and try to find out. The curious will investigate; the idle will gossip. Sooner or later they will discover the truth, or at least get an inkling of it. No matter how reserved you are, they will worm something out of you. They will follow you around and thus learn where you go. Once they find out your business here they will block you at every turn. The past vouches for the future. Just recently a pious canon and theologian with an unblemished reputation, respected and revered in the city, founded a society of schoolmistresses, which was almost ruined before it really got started.

"So close to destruction was it that only the authority of Archbishop Le Tellier was able to save it. He had to throw all his influence into the balance, and even this was scarcely enough to offset the ill-will of the city officials, or rather to win them over and get them to agree. Do you think they will approve a second institution for boys? No doubt the poor people of the city need this foundation, but the interests of God and of the poor so often must take second place to politics. To make the latter give way to the former, the archbishop will have to exert all his influence again. Will he be willing to do this, to make use of it a second time, perhaps at the risk of failure?"

These arguments were only too well founded and made Nyel realize the risk he would have run if he had gone to stay with Madame Maillefer's brother. But where could he go? What was he to do? That was what immediately disturbed him.

But the charitable concern of De La Salle did not give him much time to worry about his problem or even to suffer perplexity over it. He offered Nyel the hospitality of his own house, a move which would forestall all the inconveniences already considered.

"Come," he said with a gracious air, "come and stay with me. My home is a residence where parish priests from the country and other priests who are my friends often stay. It is just the place for you to remain so as to veil your project from public scrutiny. You look something like a parish priest from the country and people will think that you are one of them. Furthermore, I certainly have the right to offer the hospitality of my home to whomsoever I please. What the world may think about it is of no concern to me; the least of my worries is what people will say. In my house, quiet and unrecognized and without being a burden to anyone, you can easily spend a week or so. This will give us time for further consideration, for refining your plans and deciding on the best way of implementing them successfully. Once this time has elapsed you can leave for Notre Dame de Liesse* where your piety is calling you, and when you come back you can attempt to open the schools."

The offer was too obliging and too convenient to be refused. Charmed by the young canon's charity and prudence, Nyel gratefully accepted his proposal. Neither of them could foresee what would come out of the arrangement. De La Salle did not realize that by helping Nyel carry out his scheme he was beginning to forge his own destiny, nor that by bringing this schoolmaster into his home he would eventually transform it into a training school for those whom God planned to send him.

Agreeably surprised at finding a decent, commodious place to stay on his arrival in Rheims, one which well suited his projects, and at having discovered a sponsor so zealous and so capable of furthering his plans, Nyel thought only of thanking God and of informing Madame Maillefer of his good fortune. Such a favorable turn of events seemed to both of them to presage well for the success of their venture.

Madame Maillefer replied, urging her envoy to go ahead and to neglect nothing to get the project off to a favorable start. In inviting Nyel to stay with him, De La Salle had thought he was merely providing lodging for a schoolmaster; that was all he meant to do. But it was not all that God had in mind-- God Who had chosen him to become the founder of a new institute. God kept after him, through His secret inspirations, inciting him to take to heart the interests of the Christian and gratuitous schools and to put into effect all the measures needed to insure their success.

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*Notre Dame de Liesse: An ancient and celebrated sanctuary of Our Lady situated some few miles from the city of Laon in northern France. Nyel, who was from Laon, like his fellow citizens must have had a deep devotion to this shrine. Later St. De La Salle and the Brothers made pilgrimages there; the Founder seldom missed an opportunity of stopping at the shrine to say Mass.

Filled with many thoughts, the pious canon consulted God and examined in His presence how he should handle such a delicate matter. Fearing to make mistakes and not willing to rely only on his own ideas, he was inspired to seek enlightenment from those wiser than he. The first person he consulted was a close friend, Dom Claude Bretagne, at this time Abbot of the Abbey of Saint Rémy in Rheims (and later Abbot of Saint Germain-des-Prés in Paris).

He did not, however, limit himself to one single adviser. To proceed with greater assurance, and not wishing to neglect any precaution, he sought the advice of the most pious ecclesiastics in the city, those most capable of foreseeing the inconveniences to be avoided and of pointing out the most dangerous obstacles. So that they might deliberate in greater ease, he brought them together with Abbot Bretagne and held several meetings with them.

They discussed the means of getting the project started successfully. After a careful examination it was agreed that De La Salle's proposal was the safest and indeed the only feasible one. "The best and perhaps the only way," he had said, "to get these Christian and gratuitous schools off to a good start is to safeguard them from all opposition by placing them under the protection of a pastor zealous enough to assume responsibility for them, discreet enough to avoid publicity, and generous enough to support them. Since as pastor he has a right to provide for the religious instruction of his parishioners, and since his position as pastor authorizes him to appoint teachers to instruct them in Christian doctrine, nobody will venture to interfere with him or with the schools."

This advice seemed wise and was applauded. The choice of a pastor to undertake this project was another question, one even more difficult to settle; for if a bad choice were made, the whole enterprise would collapse. In such a matter where it is easy to make a mistake, we often think someone to be wise, discreet and well-intentioned when he really is not such at all. People who have a reputation for these qualities without having really deserved it often show their deficiencies when the occasion puts them to the test.

After discussing this question, the priests agreed that they should choose one of the four parish priests who seemed to enjoy the best reputation. But which one of these should be selected? Again, this was a knotty question. Finally, at De La Salle's suggestion, the majority of the group opted for the pastor of Saint Maurice, and the rest agreed that he should be chosen.

"The pastor of Saint Symphorien," said De La Salle of the first of the four pastors proposed, "would be the man we are looking for if only he got along with his superiors. Unfortunately, he doesn't; so we may as well pass him up. The second man has not got much judgment. The third is the nephew and the protégé of a city official. He owes him everything and is devoted to him. It would only take a word from his uncle and benefactor to induce him to send all of the schoolmasters away. We cannot pick him either." This third man, however, was the candidate favored by Abbot Bretagne, and the one he would have preferred if the arguments advanced by De La Salle could have been contradicted.

The choice finally fell on Nicholas Dorigny, the pastor of Saint Maurice. He was the man of sound judgment and firm in his decisions, the sort of person needed to resist the opposition which, it was feared, might come from the "Ecolâtre."* The latter, by reason of his position, might oppose the opening of this school, and in fact he tried to do so, but in vain.

All the consultors were in agreement, so the only thing remaining was to find the right way to approach the parish priest of Saint Maurice. Of all those considered, he alone presented none of the drawbacks which were anticipated and was judged capable of carrying out the proposed plan. He was a man noted for his piety, zeal and firmness in following through what he undertook. Since the first step was to make arrangements with him and concert measures to insure success, De La Salle was advised to contact him at once.

This mission he carried out with full success. As one can see, the special grace needed to do this work was already evident in him; and without his noticing it, this grace acted powerfully in all he did. He was the first to foresee difficulties, to find ways of avoiding obstacles, to suggest wise measures. Light from above taught him the direction which should be given to this undertaking, the people who should be approached, and the pastors best qualified to begin it. A single false move, a single precaution omitted, a single step too hasty or too long delayed, might have caused the whole project to fail at its inception.

The pious canon, the one God had chosen to manage this enterprise, lost no time in getting it started. He called on Father Dorigny, explained what was proposed, and informed him that the group had thought he was the priest best qualified to launch it. As it happened, he could not have found a more willing listener. No doubt, God Himself had chosen the pastor of Saint Maurice for this role, for He had already inspired him with the idea of establishing in his parish a gratuitous school taught by some ecclesiastic who would live with him. He was, therefore, agreeably surprised by the obliging offer De La Salle made to him concerning a foundation that he himself had been thinking of, which would be of great advantage to him, and which would cost him nothing.

"All we are asking you," added the pious canon, "is to present yourself as the founder of this school and to lend it your name. You parishioners are mostly poor people; it is your duty to provide instruction for them since they cannot secure it for themselves. You will give it to them through Adrian Nyel and his companion whom we are proposing to you as teachers in your school. Take them in; and if questions are asked, let it be understood that you are employing them to instruct the children of your parish."

Such an advantageous proposal was accepted with joy and alacrity. The pastor did not really need to consider it for a long time, since if offered

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*The "Ecolâtre" or "Grand Chantre" was a canon who acted as a sort of superintendent of schools dependent on the bishop. He was the special protector of the masters of the "little schools," and as such would look askance on charity schools operated by parish priests.

nothing but advantages for him. To facilitate the prompt start of the school, he offered to lodge the two schoolmasters in his house. This seemed to have been an inspiration from God, for it greatly contributed to the success of an undertaking which called for all possible precautions. Since the schoolmasters would live under the same roof as the pastor and take their meals at his table, it was only natural for people to consider them as his employees, not men who were simply on loan, as it were, and whose expenses were paid by others.

De La Salle was not slow in agreeing to the offer made by Father Dorigny and asked him whether he would be satisfied with the annual grant of 100 écus (the gift of Madame Maillefer, though her name was not mentioned) which had been promised for the two schoolmasters. The bargain was struck with great satisfaction on both sides. Thus the first Christian and gratuitous school for boys was opened in Rheims in the year 1679. Everything had turned out as De La Salle had hoped it would. There remained nothing more for him to do, or so he thought, but to thank God and to resume his duties as a good priest and canon. In this he was mistaken. For him a more demanding and laborious life was about to begin.

After witnessing the opening of the first school in Rheims and thinking this was all God was asking of him, De La Salle withdrew from the scene. From time to time, however, Nyel visited him to consult him and to ask for various favors. The charitable canon was happy to oblige him but did not go any further. The two saw each other occasionally but made no special plans for the future. They did not know how God intended to guide them to fulfill His own ends.

The two men were markedly different characters. De La Salle was calm; great reflection marked all his acts. Nyel was energetic, enterprising, and a great enthusiast. Thus, his active zeal was just what was needed to stimulate that of De La Salle, more circumspect and more cautious. The one was to be for the other the stimulus needed to bring God's work into being. Thus does it please Divine Providence to endow men with varying characters, so that despite differences they can cooperate in the execution of God's designs. The infinitely skillful Being can make use of the most unlikely instruments. His enemies themselves cooperate in bringing about His ends, and what they do to oppose His aims only helps to further their accomplishment. He delights in working with nothing, from which He draws His most impressive works. He can make use of every sex, age, social rank. He can use any man, be he infirm, feeble-minded, abandoned by all, and produce through him the most remarkable effects.

As proof of this truth we need only consider the choice of the Apostles to be the founders of the Church; the spread of the faith over all the world by men without influence, eloquence or power; the founding of religious orders in spite of all the opposition of hell; the success of so many great enterprises that grew out of such humble beginnings. It is not at all surprising, therefore, that Adrian Nyel, without ever suspecting it, should have given rise to the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, and that John Baptist de La Salle, without wishing to do so, became its founder. Here is how Divine Providence brought this about.

Madame de Croyères was a childless widow, wealthy and pious. She wished to found a boys' school in her own parish of Saint James. Nyel learned of the lady's intentions, so conformable with his own, and did not fail to seize the opportunity thus presented to him to open another school. He visited Madame de Croyères, encouraged her in her worthy project, told her what he himself was doing, won her confidence, and urged her to carry out her pious design either through an act of donation or by a foundation in due form. He then related to her all he had done in Rouen to establish Christian and gratuitous schools in that city and how well they had succeeded. He added that he had met with the same success in Rheims, where he had come to found a school.

Finally, to secure the lady's complete trust, Nyel mentioned the name of De La Salle who, he said, was acquainted with him and had become the promoter and protector of his work in Rheims. He suggested that she meet with the canon and succeeded in making her very eager to do so. He then offered to take charge of the new school if she wished and recommended De La Salle as the man most capable of executing her pious plans. Nyel's visit was not fruitless, since after having received confirmation from the good lady of her worthy project he had made her desirous to discuss it with the young canon.

Realizing that his first attempts at approaching Madame de Croyères had succeeded well, Nyel lost no time in contacting De La Salle on the same subject. He had come to know him well. Feeling that the past augured well for the future and counting on the charitable dispositions of his benefactor and protector, he did not doubt that the establishment of a gratuitous school in the Saint James parish would appeal to his zeal as much as the one in the Saint Maurice parish had done. The young canon, as prudent as he was zealous, and attentive to seek the will of God in all circumstances, at first asked himself whether he should refuse or accept Nyel's suggestion. Always cautious on such occasions, he hesitated to get involved; his wariness was also mingled with a certain reluctance.

As he was interested in all kind of good works, however, he felt obliged to lend his assistance to this one too. It so evidently bore the marks of Divine Providence that he could not obstinately refuse to recognize them. He therefore acceded to the desire of the dying lady who eagerly awaited his visit and was extremely happy to see him. Madame de Croyères opened her heart to him and explained how God had inspired her to plan a school in her parish; she begged him to attend to the matter so that the school might be opened immediately. She promised him, for the coming Easter, a sum of 500 livres for the living expenses of two teachers, and a later capital gift of 10,000 livres, the interest on which, some 500 livres per annum, would provide an annual subsidy. If this were not satisfactory, she promised either to give him property which would produce this much revenue or to add a codicil to her will obliging her heirs to pay a like sum to the schoolmasters every year. She left it up to him to decide which of these proposals suited him best.

Her promise was duly carried out. At Easter the 500 livres were promptly turned over to De La Salle. When the lady died some six weeks later, her death caused some change in the execution of her design. The 10,000 livres remained in the hands of her testamentary executor, who, however, never failed to pay the

500 livres to De La Salle as long as he remained in Rheims, and after he left, to the local Superior of the Brothers. Madame de Croyères's heirs, aware of her intentions, were faithful to carry them out.

Thus the school in the Saint James parish was opened without incident in September of that same year, 1679. Adrian Nyel himself directed it and found other teachers for the school of Saint Maurice. As the number of students in the second school grew day by day, it became necessary to employ another teacher. Thus there were five teachers who lived with the pastor of Saint Maurice. Father Dorigny, finding it difficult to lodge them for 50 écus each, requested 200 livres a year for each one, their board being extra. De La Salle agreed to be responsible for this supplementary sum, as well as for handling the payment of all their expenses.

By accepting this obligation the canon was little by little becoming further involved in the enterprise, but without really considering his involvement or wishing to do so. As yet he had nothing directly to do with the two schools that had been established other than what his charity inspired him to do for all sorts of good works. Happy over the success that the new venture seemed to be achieving, he did not look any farther afield. He let Nyel take full charge of the teachers.

But Nyel, while gifted with real piety, was not a man to assume responsibility for a community. His coming and going, the schemes he devised, the visits he made kept him away too much and did not allow him to watch over his own house or to remain quietly in it. No sooner had he started one school than he began dreaming of another. His zeal aimed at multiplying schools rather than at concentrating on making them excellent ones. His superficial way of acting led to serious trouble. He was nearly always out of the house; his absences resulted in the teachers' becoming careless and the students' growing restless. Another problem which Nyel ought to have done something about was that each teacher taught in his own way, as his fancy suggested and his own taste preferred. This lack of uniform procedure in the schools which were still in their infancy interfered with the good results that might have been hoped for.

The light of the Holy Spirit had already made De La Salle notice all these drawbacks and had inspired him with the idea of trying to remedy them. God gave him the special grace needed for the work to which He called him, and this grace grew within him day by day, almost in spite of himself, for he still had no intention whatever of taking charge of the schools, much less of the schoolmasters. "I had thought," he wrote in a memoir which he composed later on to inform the Brothers about the means Divine Providence had used to establish their Institute, "that the care which I took of the schools and of the teachers would only be external, something which would not involve me any further than to provide for their subsistence and to see to it that they carried out their duties with piety and assiduity."

This care for the schools which De La Salle assumed as an additional occupation, not really as part of his duties, still left him all the time he needed to acquire the high degree of knowledge and of virtue which would be so necessary for him when the schools eventually became his only concern. He had secured the

Licentiate sometime before this; he now passed the examinations, upheld his thesis, and fulfilled all the other requirements usual in the Rheims theological faculty as in that of Paris; but he still had not received the Doctor's cap. This he finally did in 1681 at the age of thirty.

It was about this time that an accident happened to him which could have cost him his life. He was returning from the country on foot in perfectly wretched weather. A heavy snow covered everything, obliterating every trace of the road, and a strong wind had swept the snow into the ditches. He lost his way and stumbled into a deep ravine. He had ample time to beg for God's help, because none was available from men. He would have called out in vain because the weather prevented anyone from being abroad. Man and beast had sought shelter; the countryside was deserted.

After struggling for a long time and vainly making a supreme effort to get out of the ditch, John Baptist could, it seemed, only recommend his soul to God and thus prepare to die. Death was indeed very near and seemed inevitable, for the more he struggled the weaker he became. If he had become totally exhausted, he would have been buried under a blanket of snow. If he had spent the entire night there, sunrise would have found him dead. Was he helped by God in some sensible manner? No one can say; his humility never allowed him to say so. At least Divine Providence, Which was watching over his life, succeeded without visible miracle in drawing him out of this sort of abyss by favoring the new efforts he made to get out.

He finally managed to escape, but the accident left him with a rupture caused by the violent efforts he had made to save his life. Later on, this injury helped him to remember the extreme danger from which God had delivered him and the thanks he owed Him. The event gave him matter for some deep meditations on God's protection which he had enjoyed and new motives for serving Him with greater fervor. He was so touched by this consideration that he never spoke of the incident except with great expressions of gratitude.

Chapter IX

In Spite of the Extreme Reluctance Which De La Salle Feels in the Depths of His Soul to Live with People so Little Polished as the Schoolmasters, His Love for the Good Which Could Be Done Makes Him Decide to Bring Them Closer to Him, to Supervise Them, and Finally to Admit Them to His Own House.

An undertaking never bears a more visible sign of being God's work than when it is marked with the cross. When everything in the world takes up arms to overthrow it, when all hell rises up to destroy it; when it is assailed on every side and seems within an inch of perishing, yet does not succumb; or if it does falter, it rises again immediately and draws new strength from its fall--all this is a sign that the hand of the Most High supports it and that it is His

work. A man of God never shows more clearly that his mission is from heaven than when he nourishes in his heart, like Jeremiah the prophet, a deep distrust for works that bring him public attention; when, like Saint John the Baptist, he undertakes these works only if God orders him to do so; when to undertake them he needs to act in spite of his repugnance; when he must sacrifice his own tranquillity and reputation.

In these traits one can recognize a summary portrait of De La Salle and of his Institute. When his work was beginning, nothing but thunderbolts and tempests greeted it. On every side it encountered nothing but violent and continual attacks, yet it subsisted. Although frequently poised on the slopes leading to destruction, it did not fall. If it seemed to suffer momentary eclipse, the next day saw it rise from the darkness.

When he began, De La Salle did not fully realize in what he was involved. He thought he was only lending a hand. As he became more deeply involved, his entire being revolted at the thought of the design which he was putting into operation. He yielded only when he felt he saw God's will clearly marked out for him. This obedience would call upon him to despoil himself of all his worldly goods, to give up the comforts of life, and generally to accept the deprivation of everything that the heart of man most cherishes.

Meanwhile, the world would give free rein to its criticism and calumnies against his work. His every move became a crime. He was scrutinized, examined, taken to task; nothing in him escaped malignant tongues. After giving all his actions a ridiculous interpretation, the public would not even allow him credit for good intentions. Men called him ambitious, one eager to win a name for himself in the world. He was, they said, ready to sacrifice his canonry, his patrimonial wealth, his family's interests, his relatives' good name, in order to purchase for himself the title of "Founder." It is a glorious thing to appear as a saint, and that is what he was after. Such was the phantom he pursued with his broad-brimmed hat, his flat, thick-soled shoes, his external appearance so strange and uncouth. All this was what the world soon started saying about him.

Without waiting for the future to give the lie to these malicious tales by the remarkable examples of dependence, humility, and submission which he so often gave to his spiritual children, the Brothers of the Christian Schools, we can see how unjust these reproaches were simply by observing his dispositions at the time and the sacrifices he had to make. What worldlings call chance and what Christians call Divine Providence had brought him into contact with Adrian Nyel and his companion. He did not know where God was leading him when He convinced him to take an interest in the schools. He found himself involved in caring for them but hardly realized his growing commitment; even less did he want to take charge. One step led to another; when he finally emerged on the path where Divine Providence had brought him blindfolded, God's will was made clear to him by those whom he consulted and whom he listened to as oracles of the Holy Spirit.

For fear that the reader may think that we are simply imagining these dispositions of his, let us listen to what he himself had to say. "It was," he de-

clares in the memoir mentioned previously, "by these two events, namely by my meeting Adrian Nyel and by the proposal made to me by this lady (Madame de Croyères), that I began to take an interest in the boys' schools. Prior to this I had never given them a thought. The suggestion, of course, had been made to me before. Several of Canon Roland's friends had tried to hint to me to become involved, but the proposal had never made any impression on my mind, and I had never considered carrying it out.

"Indeed, if I had ever thought that the care I was taking of the schoolmasters out of pure charity would ever have made it my duty to live with them, I would have dropped the whole project. For since, naturally speaking, I considered the men whom I was obliged to employ in the schools at the beginning as being inferior to my valet, the mere thought that I would have to live with them would have been insupportable to me. Indeed, I experienced a great deal of unpleasantness when I first had them come to my house. This lasted two years.

"It was undoubtedly for this reason that 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."

It was, then, entirely wrong for people to accuse him of ambition and of seeking in a lowly condition and a poor and austere life the means of exalting himself and of winning worldly honor.

Interest in the progress of the schools, however, was growing in De La Salle in proportion as he took more complete charge of them. The grace of leadership, which unknowingly he already had in their regard, afforded him much insight as to the best manner of conducting schools. The Spirit of God not only showed him the serious flaws in the existing schools, but likewise indicated to him the proper way to correct these. As we have said, one source of the trouble was the man who had promoted the entire undertaking. Adrian Nyel, while capable of running a school, scarcely knew how to direct the teachers. He did not give adequate attention to the details of directing the residence, was not insistent enough on having regulations observed nor faithful in giving to the others an example of the necessary stability of conduct.

This was the first reason for the disorder. De La Salle could do little to correct it unless he was closer to the Brothers. It was necessary for him to draw nearer to them or to bring them into closer contact with him. They needed to be gathered under one roof and under his eyes if he were to control them to any extent and establish among them a uniform and regular manner of life.

This conviction led him to rent a house not far from his own mansion where they could live and where he could visit them more often. To cut down on expenses, he had their meals prepared in his house and brought to them. Thus he induced them to adopt a less independent lifestyle. All this was done. The schoolmasters moved into the residence near De La Salle's at Christmas, 1679. The dedicated

canon urged them to live a more orderly life and prescribed some regulations for them to observe.

Although Adrian Nyel had no capacity for directing a community, he was nonetheless eager to do good. Happy over what was being accomplished, he willingly supported the initiative by his example. He gladly agreed to the new regulations and was the first to conform to them. While his objectives and those of De La Salle were quite divergent, the two men agreed when it came to the means for making them succeed.

De La Salle wanted to bring some order into the schoolmasters' manner of living; Nyel dreamed only of opening new schools. The former, by having the schoolmasters live near him, found it easier to guide them and was closer at hand to watch over them. The latter, being thus partly relieved of a vigilance which interfered with his activities, enjoyed greater liberty to indulge in his preferred occupations. He did just that; for no sooner was the transfer to the new house effected than he importuned De La Salle to let him open a third school in it. When opened, this new school soon became better disciplined and enrolled more pupils than either of the other two.

These first attempts at bringing some order into the undertaking, however, merely made the pious canon realize more acutely how sorely the schoolmasters needed direction and how much still remained to be done in this regard. The regulations covering a few points simply showed how unsystematic the schoolmasters remained in many other respects. Rising and retiring, mental prayer, holy Mass and meals were assigned to fixed times, and these the men observed; but the rest of the time was theirs to dispose of. Masters of their actions as well as of their persons, they followed their own whims in everything when Nyel was absent. Each one's devotion or caprice decided when he received Communion. They went out every Sunday morning and on feast days, wherever they felt like going. In the house, as well as outside it, there was no obedience, no silence, no true community life.

Nyel's religious spirit, which ought to have made all these points the main object of his zeal, found its exercise elsewhere. He did make it a strict duty to be assiduously present in school, to bring the students to high Mass on Sundays, to make new acquaintances and to keep up with his old ones in view of winning people's favor for his projects for new schools. Since he was almost never where he should have spent his time in order by his presence to create a spirit of community among the schoolmasters--a spirit of order, silence, regularity and obedience--the result was that in spite of the efforts of the vigilant canon, disorder reigned in the residence.

De La Salle saw all this and deplored it, but what could he do to remedy the situation? Nyel was not a man who could be expected to make a vow to stay put. I doubt that this would have been possible for him with his restless, roving disposition. If the canon could have taken Nyel's place and made up for his absence, everything would have run more smoothly; but what chance was there that a canon would give up his position and his choir duties in order to assume responsibility as the superior in a house for schoolmasters? How could a man

burdened with so many other obligations forsake them to run a community of six schoolmasters?

At all events, De La Salle had plenty of time to think the matter over, for he had rented the house next to his for a year and a half. He therefore had leisure to consider the means by which he could eventually introduce more order and greater regularity among the schoolmasters. As neither his reflections nor the passage of time suggested any foolproof solution for the problem, he remained uncertain as to what he should do. He could see only two possibilities: lodge the masters in his own home or continue renting the other building. He did not know which alternative to choose, and this uncertainty threw him into some perplexity.

He could not bring himself to let the schoolmasters continue to live as they pleased, with no order or standards of behavior, and consequently without true piety. He would have preferred to stop looking after them entirely. Himself a man who lived by rule, he wanted this same attitude to prevail wherever he went. As he could not live without order, he could not permit those under his care to live without a determined schedule.

To invite these men into his house, lodge them under the same roof, associate with them and start living a common life with them was an arrangement that promised many difficulties. Nature grew alarmed over it, and within himself De La Salle felt a very great repugnance to adopt this course. His human reactions and his natural inclinations revolted at the very thought. He also foresaw that if he went through with it he would have to contend with the opposition of his colleagues in the Chapter and of his relatives and friends.

Because the more he reflected the less he felt able to come to a decision, it became necessary for him to seek a solution for his doubts in the advice of some person familiar with God's ways. Docile, humble, ever on guard against his own judgment, he preferred to follow the guidance of others in acting. But whom could he consult on such a delicate matter? Was there in Rheims a man sufficiently enlightened or courageous to advise him to do what was most perfect, whatever the cost to his own reputation and at the risk of provoking a thousand recriminations from the angry De La Salle family and from an entire city up in arms?

Father Nicholas Barré was, of all men, the one who on this occasion seemed the best qualified to give De La Salle advice according to the mind of God. An eloquent man, successful in his undertakings, well versed in the ways of the interior life, knowing more than most about Christian schools, proof against all human views and fears, he had only the greater glory of God at heart. Those who listened to him felt inspired with a noble liberty to seek this glory at the expense of their self-love.

He was the man whom the canon was inspired to consult, for he was the originator and first founder of Christian and gratuitous schools in France. He possessed a special understanding of this subject. Moreover, he knew Adrian Nyel; nobody was better qualified than he to give advice concerning him. Aware that as long as a man of Nyel's character remained in charge of the schoolmasters it

was useless to expect to find among them order, regularity or community spirit, he did not hesitate to urge De La Salle to take the schoolmasters into his home and to live with them.

His advice was certainly wise, necessary and inspired by heaven; but it was easier for him to give than for De La Salle to carry out. In following it De La Salle had to expect that he would meet with perplexities insurmountable for anyone less courageous than he. He understood the obstacles thoroughly. His realization clashed with his conviction of how necessary it was to adopt the advice he had been given. This opposition led him to suspend his decision and to put off its execution.

On the one hand, the spiritual benefit for the teachers, the good done in their schools, and his own liking for order and regularity were powerful motives which impelled him and did not permit him to turn aside from such a desirable course of action. On the other hand, his aversion for associating with such uncultured people, the horror he felt at having to live with men who for the most part lacked social polish, refinement of manner, good-breeding, and the capacity of taking part, not so much in an agreeable conversation as even in a rational one, put his impressionability to the torture and warned him not to go too fast in making up his mind.

This natural distaste he secretly felt was fortified by human reasons capable of making a deep impression on a man belonging to a noble family, who was a good brother and a considerate relative. He had his three brothers living with him; it was his responsibility to look after their property, their education and their guidance. What could justify sending them away from his home in order to replace them with schoolmasters? But to make them live a common life with these men was simply unreasonable from the human point of view. Still, he had to choose between these alternatives; neither one would be popular with anybody. His decision would necessarily bring down on him trouble and contradiction from his family, who would be shocked and irritated by this mixing together of people of such divergent social conditions. His relatives would not fail to consider this change a dishonor and to reproach him with it as with a crime.

The devil, who pleads nature's cause, added his voice to these clamors. What, people asked him, can you really want to lodge these peasants in your home and live with such scum?* What will people say? What will your family think? What will even your most pious friends feel about it? At least, consult them before you undertake such a course of action, and listen to their advice lest after acting rashly you may have good reason to regret what you have done. If you will not heed them, at least consult your own weakness; have pity on yourself; do not take upon yourself a yoke too heavy and burdensome for your delicate constitution. Such were the considerations which nature suggested and the devil advanced and which were reinforced by the protests of human reason.

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* In French, canaille--perhaps the most opprobrious word that a polite writer like Blain could possibly have used.

Before anything else, he needed to get his three brothers to agree to this plan, one which naturally was not likely to appeal overmuch to them. Consequently, to bring the project about with wisdom and due precaution, he had to temporize and to wait for the right occasion. All these considerations upset the canon's mind and prevented him from coming quickly to a final conclusion. Several months went by as he remained in uncertainty. Time, of course, did not solve the problem for him, and the trouble in the schools was getting worse. Undecided, wavering, he was awaiting God's own good time, trusting in one of those moves by Providence which by causing projects to be born or to die show us the way out of our indecision and, when we least think of it, disclose to us the path we must follow.

In the end, Divine Providence did show Itself, and in so doing it forced De La Salle to declare himself and to make up his mind. This is how it came about.

The mayor and the councilmen of the city of Guise, having heard of the success achieved by the gratuitous schools in Rheims, asked Nyel to establish a school in their town. This proposal, so conformable to his inclination, was a temptation for Nyel, which, clothed by his imagination in the garb of God's will, did not take long to win his assent. While willingly yielding to this temptation, he convinced himself that he was only obeying God's orders. All the circumstances of time and place should have opened his eyes and made him see that in thus carrying out a premature project there was more of nature than of grace involved, more natural impulsiveness than true desire to do God's will.

In vain did De La Salle try to show him the imprudence of such a step. He observed that Holy Week was not the proper time to make such a trip to Guise, still less to throw himself into all the comings and goings required for the opening of a school. His absence would leave five or six teachers to their own devices, thus exposing them to greater disorder; and neither he nor they would be able to spend the holiest period of the year in the recollection, piety and edification which it calls for. Again, the proposal made to him was not a definite one; unless he let the idea mature he would see it come to nothing (which is precisely what happened); finally, De La Salle remarked that it was pointless to build up with one hand while tearing down with the other.

If Nyel cared to give the matter a moment's serious reflection, he would agree that by founding a school at Guise he would destroy the ones he had established in Rheims, since he had nobody in the latter place to carry on what he had started. Common sense itself spoke through the mouth of John Baptist, but Nyel would not listen. The prudent canon was wasting his breath on a man convinced he was right, one who could not see anything but God's will in what he himself wanted. The canon's remonstrances fell upon deaf ears. Nyel departed, and his going obliged De La Salle to resolve to invite the schoolmasters to come to his house for their meals.

Thus does God cause all that occurs to work convergently for the fulfillment of His plans. De La Salle was still hesitant and uncertain about what final decision to make with regard to the schoolmasters. Nyel's departure, which left them at the mercy of their own whims and which left that work he had

started only half established, should, it would seem, have indisposed De La Salle towards the whole business. On the contrary, it was this circumstance that began to attach him to it more closely than ever and to get him more directly involved in it.

Human prudence would have judged that Nyel's departure would be a blow to the newly founded schools; but in God's designs it was necessary and helpful because it brought in De La Salle and substituted him, the man destined to be the founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, for the man who, as regards that bigger enterprise, was simply an outsider.

Chapter X

Beginnings of Common Life for De La Salle and the Schoolmasters. The World Is Aroused; His Family Complains and Objects to This New Type of Life.

De La Salle had at last resolved to start living with the schoolmasters. How was he able to bring himself to take up a type of life which inspired him with such great repugnance? Would he have thought, just two short years before, that he would ever come to such a decision? True, he had only taken one step in their company, and for the moment he did not intend to go any further; but this first step would lead to many others of which he still remained ignorant. He would have drawn back, perhaps, if he had foreseen how far he would later go. Divine Providence led him by the hand, as one leads a blind man. He will be surprised indeed one day when he finds himself in the midst of people he previously shrank from, yet with whom he will bind himself in a society lasting for his whole lifetime.

At first, De La Salle did not bring the masters to live in his house. He limited himself to inviting them to come for meals so that he could begin to regulate their actions. After morning mental prayer they heard Mass at six o'clock, then they came to his house which was close by theirs. They remained with him until time for night prayers after which they went back home to sleep. In the canon's house there already existed a fixed regulation. Good books were read during meals, and prayers were recited at fixed times. Thus the presence of the schoolmasters did not call for any great changes in the daily routine.

At this time, however, the meals were served in the dining room with individual portions for each, and a set time was assigned for each action of the day. De La Salle took advantage of the fact that Nyel was gone for the week to study the schoolmasters. Once he had them under his eyes, he did not take long to notice a number of minor disorders among them, brought about by the negligence of their leader who had not watched over them closely enough.

What he saw convinced John Baptist that a man who was a stranger in his own house, where he was seen less often than elsewhere on account of the visits he paid, his early departure each morning for school and his late return each evening, was not the man to introduce order into an establishment nor to inspire his inferiors with stability. The schoolmasters, for their part, willingly conformed to regulations and seemed to show good will in observing them. Several displayed real piety and made the new superior hope that they would advance in their prayer life. They seemed like new men since they had begun living in an orderly fashion and since obedience, by regulating their actions, also governed their wills.

These first signs of the change which had come over them convinced the canon that he should indeed take charge of them himself and should encourage them to keep on coming to his house so that they might live a more regular life. But being very wise, he proceeded slowly to make sure he made no false step in so thorny a matter. In the circumstances he had to study both the master's dispositions with regard to their new manner of living and those of his own brothers with regard to these strangers--not to mention the reactions of the public and of his relatives concerning this new mode of life.

Although he did not intend to let his family dictate to him, he would have preferred not to irritate its members, and he did all he could to avoid clashing with them. While paying little attention to what the world said, he avoided insofar as he could giving anyone grounds to criticize him. Though his brothers were not the rulers in his house, he did not want to displease them and would have been very happy had they shared his intentions. As for the schoolmasters, it would have been useless to try to bind them by rules and obedience so long as their hearts did not consent thereto. Virtue is the result of grace and the cooperation of the human will; unless the latter is won over and surrenders itself to God, all external conformity is merely so much window dressing and hypocrisy.

These were the considerations that the zealous canon had to pay attention to and which he did consider carefully. He went ahead little by little and without rushing anything. He felt he had to humor all the people interested and to prepare them for what he planned to do. As he had not found any insurmountable opposition to his first attempts, he decided not to push things any farther for the present and to have the masters continue, after Nyel's return, the lifestyle they had adopted during his absence. They had not yet had time to tire of it. Fervor that lasts for a week is not too rare. But would it hold up? Only experience would tell. To find out, De La Salle wanted to take more time.

If the schoolmasters were to grow weary of a regular life and show their distaste for it, De La Salle would not have to withdraw from any stance he had taken. He could renew the lease on the house he had secured for them and which was about to expire, or he could rent another one nearby which was available and then give over the direction of the teachers once again to Nyel and leave them to their own devices. Meantime, the schoolmasters continued, from Easter to the feast of Saint John the Baptist (June 24) to live the regular type of life they had begun.

During this period the canon, who had been narrowly observing them, saw on the one hand that they seemed to like this new sort of life but, on the other, that the instability of Nyel, who sought nothing but occasions for staying away, made it impossible to count on him. Hence he made up his mind to have the men come and live completely in his house. Accordingly, they moved in on the feast of Saint John the Baptist, his patronal feast, in the year 1681. Nyel, who really wanted what was best and who realized that thanks to this move he himself would be freer than ever, came with them.

This step was decisive. It was bound to cause a good deal of excitement and much talk in the city and to provoke complaints and loud outcries from the De La Salle family. But John Baptist was prepared for all this. He expected that the world, which up to this time had held its fire, would certainly censure him now; and that his relatives, narrowly observing his course of action and shocked by this last decision, would no longer restrain their indignation. In fact, they did not.

On this occasion the world expressed every disparaging remark that it could think of against good works in general and against those who devote themselves to them. With regard to this particular project and to its author, everybody expressed all the criticism, mockery and ridicule that the world's false wisdom, its characteristic spirit and its natural malignity suggested. The canon was cited to answer for his behavior before as many tribunals as there were families in the city. Everyone investigated him and set himself up as a judge; there were as many different sentences handed down as there were judges. But however diverse these verdicts were, in one respect they all agreed: he was guilty and should be condemned.

Some people criticized him because of the sort of men he was associating with; others, because of the type of occupation he was going to take up. Several maintained that his reason had been affected and that too much devotion had upset his mind. Among his friends some reproached him with the bizarre nature of his conduct; others expressed pity and compassion for him through an all too human sentiment. Few approved him; the most moderate contented themselves with admiring his zeal, without venturing to judge him.

As for his relatives, the wisest ones or those who cared for him the most did not presume to address any reproaches to him but did let their silence speak their discontent. Others, less restrained, gave vent to their chagrin by caustic invectives. They accused him of staining the honor of the family, of blotting the escutcheon by associating with people of such low standing. They said he was not living up to his blood, and that he besmirched it by having these strangers sit at his table; that it was ridiculous for him not to make any distinction between them and his own brothers and to subject both to a type of life so much out of the ordinary and which, to begin with, did not suit either group. Finally, they complained that he was driving away all the decent people from his house and that there was no longer any honor to be had in visiting him.

Having prepared himself for this sort of onslaught and having expected it, De La Salle made use only of silence and patience to defend himself. He let everyone say his piece and paid no attention but went ahead with his plans. Al-

though undecided and hesitant for so long, he had come to realize in his serious reflections what the decision that God had inspired him with would cost him. Having finally made up his mind, he remained steadfast. It may even be said that the tribulation he went through in coming to his resolution was the greatest trial he had to endure in this whole matter. His acceptance beforehand of all the sacrifices he would have to make obtained for him abundant grace to endure everything in peace and serenity of soul.

When people saw that De La Salle remained as firm as a rock in the midst of all the waves and crosscurrents and storms which evil tongues had stirred up against him, they finally let him alone. They washed their hands of him, saying that he was a stubborn man, obstinately attached to his own opinion, and that nothing would be gained by new attempts, even if inspired by zeal and even if more emphatic than the previous ones. Their next thought was to remove his brothers from his control. Had they been able to do so, they would have wished to put him under a guardian himself, rather than let him be responsible for his brothers.

His three brothers, whom he was bringing up in the house and educating with true solicitude, took their meals in the same dining room as the schoolmasters. The eldest of the three, deeply attached to John Baptist, was a sincerely pious lad who willingly conformed to the same rules insofar as his studies permitted. Such conformity the family could not bear to see. They resolved to withdraw the three brothers from the house. Their efforts, however, remained fruitless as regards the oldest. His affection for his brother-guardian and his personal piety could not be swayed.

It was different with the next lad. He listened to what his passionate brother-in-law told him and adopted the latter's point of view. Little by little he took a dislike for his tutor and benefactor. Discontented, this young man did not long delay in following the advice given him. He left the home of his brother the canon and went to live with his sister and brother-in-law. His departure was soon followed by that of the youngest boy. At first his relatives requested John Baptist to give his consent to this move. When he refused, they gathered together and decided to send the boy to the Canons Regular at Senlis. They did this to mortify the canon on a point which they knew he would feel most keenly, since it made him appear to be little concerned over the honor of his family and the remonstrances of his relatives.

However, God was directing all these events in view of the fulfillment of His designs. The family thought only of causing De La Salle grief and of giving the boy what they considered a better education. But by emptying John Baptist's house, God planned to afford him full liberty to follow His holy inspirations and to enable him to inaugurate the manner of living which needed to be established among the Brothers.

On this occasion John Baptist seized the opportunity to leave his own home and to withdraw with the schoolmasters to another house he had rented quite a distance from the Cathedral. No doubt God had destined it to be the cradle of his Institute. It was there, in fact, that the Institute began. The house

became the Brothers' property in 1700 when De La Salle bought it with the money provided by three charitable persons. The Brothers of Rheims still live there. It was while residing in this cradle of the Institute that he who was about to become its father and founder conceived the generous resolution to resign his canonry. This he did in 1683, as we shall see.

In this new locale De La Salle felt himself perfectly free and busied himself only with organizing his little flock and giving it the form of a community. He naturally took the lead as the superior, but he was not yet the schoolmasters' confessor. It was important to choose a good confessor. Without the help of a good priest who would consolidate by his direction in the inner forum what the superior was trying to build up externally, no success could be expected. When the confessor of a community happens to be in opposition to the maxims and principles of a good superior, he destroys what the other builds up. He sows cockle where good seed had been planted.

Having several confessors is also to be avoided in communities, because it brings about diversity of opinions and divides minds and hearts. Unity being the soul of community, one of the main means of creating union in regular societies is to have a single confessor, in addition, of course, to the extraordinary confessors that the Church requires from time to time.

Convinced of this, De La Salle tried to encourage the schoolmasters to go to the same confessor. This they did, choosing the pastor of their parish. Although he was a very fine man and very capable, he did not understand community life. Some of the masters grew disenchanted with him. Another confessor was selected, but he lived a considerable distance away and the masters had to wait in line with the women in front of his confessional. This waiting sometimes took so long that the masters returned home only about eight or nine o'clock at night. Such serious inconveniences called for attention. They would come to a sudden end if De La Salle would consent to hear the confessions of his followers.

Several of them begged him to do so and even insisted in the hope of persuading him to give in. Invoking the arguments mentioned above, they tried to overcome his reluctance. They added great demonstrations of high regard for him and confidence in him. In fact, filled with esteem and respect for the virtuous canon who had taken charge of them, they did not want to separate their superior from their confessor. The superior, however, was cautious and circumspect. He feared complications and found it difficult to accede to their request. In truth, he did not see too many inconveniences in the idea at the moment, but he felt that they might be hidden and might come to light later on. For this reason he preferred to put off the decision rather than to make it too hastily. He therefore held off for a long time before giving in to the masters' pressing requests.

Finally their perseverance obliged him to yield. Their reasons were good and impressed him. The more the spirit of regularity took possession of them, the more they felt the need of being guided by their father. De La Salle acceded to their pious desire. The example of those who had from the first en-

trusted the care of their souls to him proved effective with regard to the others and encouraged them to show a similar confidence in their superior. From that time forth the Brothers never wanted anyone else but their holy Founder as their confessor. They would indeed have been hard to please had a man so gentle, humble, charitable and enlightened in the ways of God not been able to satisfy them.

The unity of spiritual guidance did a great deal of good for the masters because it helped all of them to acquire the spirit of their father. They accepted the same maxims, had the same views and sentiments. In a word, they had but one heart and one soul.

The humble canon, however, ever on guard against himself, had yielded only with some reluctance to the desire of his disciples who wanted no other confessor but him. His diffidence in this matter obliged him to consult wise and enlightened persons and to beg the extraordinary confessors to tell him whether they felt there was any objection to his combining the duties of confessor with the office of superior. None of them ever suggested that he give up his double role. On the contrary, all of them exhorted him not to divide the two ministries, which naturally ought to be joined.

Finding himself thus placed by Divine Providence at the head of the group of schoolmasters, and fulfilling in their regard the double function of superior and confessor, De La Salle put forth all his efforts to help them sanctify themselves. He lived among them as one of them, causing them to forget what he had been as completely as he himself seemed to forget it. Affable, gracious, kind, compassionate, charitable, he won their hearts and made them surrender to him the key thereto only so that he could open the door to Jesus Christ. Through a charity like that of Saint Paul, he made himself all things to all, to the extent of seeking to rid himself, amid these unpolished men, of the aura of refinement which nature and a noble education had given him. I would almost say that out of charity he affected to become common with these commoners.

This adjustment required a heroic effort on his part because nothing had inspired him with more repugnance for joining them than the rudeness of manners which might be the consequence of a plebeian origin and education. In his words and actions were of one piece. If he gave the masters beautiful lessons about virtue, at the same time he afforded them even more striking examples of it. Since the mouth speaks from the abundance of the heart, the first virtues which he sought to cultivate in their souls were those that he himself already possessed to a high degree: modesty, humility, interior spirit, mortification, regularity, docility, charity, forgetfulness of injuries, poverty, love of abjection and patience--all virtues which would become the basis of the spiritual edifice he was going to build: the soul and the spirit of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

Wishing to make of his companions men of solid virtue and piety, he strove solely to bring them to God through their wills, to attach them to Him by the bonds of love, to make them truly interior Christians. In this endeavor, so conformable to his humility, he did not want to introduce anything by mere

authority. He contented himself with inspiring them with his own spirit, and thus he gave them the flattering satisfaction of thinking that they themselves had originated their new manner of life and their practices, and that they were making their own laws for themselves. To lead them into the paths where he wanted to see them walk, he made use only of exhortation and example. He practiced what he taught, first of all; and the shame of not imitating him obliged the least fervent ones to conform to his example.

It did not take long, however, for him to perceive that several of the schoolmasters were already relaxing their efforts in the pursuit of virtue and that perfection is not for everyone. Such a strictly regulated life appeared too constraining to some of the men who had lived so much more freely under Nyel in the neighboring house.

Novelty, which at first is always attractive to some extent, had made them willing to try the new lifestyle during the first months; but to keep on living this way seemed to several an uninviting prospect and beyond their modest virtue. The yoke of a life of retreat, silence, obedience, and regularity began to seem heavier and heavier so that it overwhelmed those wills which were too sluggish and not sufficiently fortified in the practice of virtue. To keep on doing until death what they found so difficult now at the beginning, seemed to them more than they could bear. They could see that no mitigation was to be expected from a man like De La Salle and that, on the contrary, since his own fervor grew day by day, it would demand that they follow in his footsteps or else endure the disgrace of not imitating him.

Thus several preferred to leave. It was not an easy decision for them to make, for on such occasions one's conscience struggles with the attraction of a more comfortable life and of greater liberty; but in the end they left. De La Salle was likewise obliged to dismiss some others who, while pious enough, did not have much aptitude for their work in the schools and who had been employed mostly out of necessity.

Thus he was obliged to replace nearly all his personnel in the space of six months. Only one or two of the original schoolmasters remained with him. The new Institute's tomb seemed destined to be erected close by its cradle. Its failure seemed about to follow upon its launching. But He Who calls back from the grave and gives life even to the dead did not delay in reviving this faltering society by sending it new recruits who had the talents needed for teaching, a basic piety, and a strong determination to become true disciples of De La Salle.

It was, then, towards the end of 1681 or the beginning of 1682 that the group of schoolmasters began shaping up as a true community. Good Adrian Nyel, who remained with them until Christmas, 1681, was agreeably surprised at the changes taking place beneath his eyes, delighted by the good order established among the men, and edified by their new mode of living, so regular and recollected. He loved all that was good and felt happy to see all that was being accomplished in the establishments he had started.

It would seem that Nyel should have become part of the community and taken up his abode with the others; but like a migratory bird which seems to want to visit the whole earth without stopping to rest anywhere, Nyel could not abide stability, could not give up his yen to keep moving. His disposition made him as ready to wander from one place to another to establish schools as Saint Paul's had been to found new churches.

There had then taken place a complete transformation in the work of the schools: a new house, new teachers, a new way of life, new spiritual direction. Jesus Christ could have said of it, "Behold, I make all things new through My servant." Not surprisingly, a vine so thoroughly renewed did not delay in producing its flowers and in spreading abroad its sweet perfume. As we shall see, it soon progressed from the stage in which everyone made fun of it to that in which it acquired a solid reputation so that neighboring cities hastened to invite within their walls the disciples of the pious canon.

Chapter XI

New Foundations of Christian and Gratuitous Schools at Rethel, Guise and Laon. Circumstances Which Give De La Salle the Idea of Resigning His Canonry and Later of Divesting Himself of His Fortune so as to Devote Himself Entirely to the Development of His Work.

The town of Rethel was the first which asked John Baptist to send some of his new schoolmasters to teach. Delighted by this request, Nyel would not have hesitated to say yes; but De La Salle, more circumspect, felt that it was not advisable to employ there men whom he had not yet had time to train properly. He knew what the saints say on this subject: that premature fruit is not good to eat and tastes bitter; that birds which attempt to leave the nest and fly before their wings are fully developed become the prey of the hawks or fall to the ground never to rise again; that children born before term seldom live.

Convinced of all this, he preferred to lose the chance of making a new foundation rather than to expose his disciples, still insufficiently confirmed in virtue, to the danger of a lapse. Because his intentions were pure, he viewed with indifference the multiplication of establishments as long as they could not be staffed by men of really proven virtue. Thus, the proposal from the magistrates of Rethel seemed to him a matter that called for careful consideration. He did not wish to hurry matters, fearing that one of his novice-teachers or a fresh recruit from his little community might find his downfall in the very place where he was assigned to work for the sanctification of others.

Thinking thus, he looked upon what he had begun to do for their training only as a first step in leading them to the perfection they needed to achieve. True, the young men he then had to work with seemed full of good will, but he realized that desire is a long way from performance, that one's first efforts

at acquiring virtue leave one a great distance from the habit of virtue. Moreover, the example of Jesus Christ, Who spent three years training His disciples in His divine school, and Who did not want to expose their fragile virtue to the world until He had fortified it through the descent of the Holy Spirit and the infusion of His gifts, taught him to keep his men near him in a fervent novitiate for as long as possible and not to send them out to teach until they had made sufficient progress in holiness.

These considerations restrained him. They convinced him that the best thing to do was to promise to send some of his subjects later on but at present to keep them with him to complete their training. At first this is what he did. After some time, however, he could no longer act as he preferred. The Duke of Mazarin so strongly seconded the request of the Rethel authorities, and the zealous pastor besought him so insistently, that he had to give in. When De La Salle could no longer, in all courtesy, delay the matter, he asked Nyel to take charge of the new foundation. The latter was always ready for such an adventure and was the best man in the world to negotiate the terms of a contract.

Again he did so successfully, getting the city to provide for the living expenses of two schoolmasters. The Duke and the pastor also contributed, as did a certain Mademoiselle Bouralletti, who later left an annual sum of fifty livres for this school. These favorable circumstances led De La Salle to buy a house in Rethel some time later, intending to establish there a seminary for his Institute. As soon as Nyel reached the town, everything was settled on terms which still persist today. Because De La Salle found in the generosity of the city fathers, of the Duke, and of the pastor all that he desired, he opened the gratuitous school in 1682.

We cannot omit here two facts concerning this establishment which bring out the high degree of perfection which De La Salle had attained at this time. The Duke of Mazarin had conceived a high esteem for De La Salle and wished to know him better. He took pleasure in conversing with him and honored him by his visits.

Some years after the founding of the school we have been speaking of, the nobleman, wishing to honor De La Salle's virtue, decided to add 200 livres a year to the Brothers' income, to be paid from the revenues of his estates. He proposed this to De La Salle who accepted the offer with gratitude. The contract was drawn up but never signed. It was to have been signed the following day, without fail; it probably would have been except for the intrigues of certain meddling people who disliked the good that was being done. They managed to make the Duke change his mind so that from one day to the next he appeared like a different man.*

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*The Duke got his title from his wife, the niece of Cardinal Mazarin. She had inherited the latter's immense wealth. The Duke was known as a pious but flighty person, unreliable and given to sudden changes of attitude. Saint-Simon has left an unflattering portrait of him.

To De La Salle's great surprise, when he returned to the Duke's home the following day to complete the details of the agreement, he found him cold and remote, even apparently anxious to make sport of him. The humble canon put up with the Duke's unmerited reproaches and humiliating sarcasm without showing any lack of respect to him, but he would not compromise the honor of his own character. He firmly turned down certain onerous conditions which were proposed and refused with a virile reserve to go along with certain requests he felt were unbecoming.

Finally, after he had in a modest tone and with a tranquil air explained away the quibbles aimed at voiding the contract already agreed upon, he took his departure, happy that he had reaped only contumely from an affair that had begun by words of praise and testimonials of high esteem for his person. He knew those who were to blame for this failure, but never did he reproach them nor allow anyone to show them the least resentment for it.

The Servant of God did well to accustom himself to affronts and to arm himself against raillery and insult, for the task he was undertaking would become a fruitful source of such trials. The rest of his life would be one long series of persecutions and humiliations of all kinds. Almost daily, as time went on, he saw storm clouds accumulate over his head. One often grew out of another, and the end of the first marked the beginning of the second. Thus, these afflictions followed one another and created a tempest which lasted as long as he lived. The thunderclaps ceased to echo around him only when he rested in the grave.

In all such events, however, the virtuous canon considered only the source from which they sprang. He always went back to their origin. Knowing that God was their author, however trying or disagreeable they might be, with love and submission he kissed the hand that sent them. A man who wanted only what God wanted, and desired nothing outside of His will, he was persuaded that outside of sin nothing happens in this world save by God's command. Hence he remained indifferent to whatever occurred.

The most mortifying turn of events always found him calm and resigned. No mishap, however disagreeable, ever robbed him of his peace or altered the evenness of his disposition. And yet, how many such experiences did he not have to face during his life, while trying to bring his Institute into being! How many contradictions did he not suffer! What persecutions did the world and the devil not stir up against him! The reader will marvel at his trials as he reads this history.

This first establishment at Rethel provided the occasion for the initial acts of injustice which he suffered as the first proofs of his disinterested attitude. Two of the wealthiest persons in that city had left him a considerable sum to help out with the foundation of the school. The donation had been made in due legal form, and he had already received the papers and other legal instruments. But the avaricious heirs contested the legacy. Even though they had received the lion's share of the inheritance, they begrudged him the little part allotted to him for good works.

Because this legacy was intended for a pious cause, these heirs were determined not to give in. They did not need to take any pains to circumvent the judges and to prepare the documents needed for the lawsuit because De La Salle himself decided in their favor and adjudged them the winners by withdrawing his claim. He preferred to lose the money rather than to expose his peace of mind to the worries of a lawsuit and to risk wounding charity. This example of disinterestedness was as edifying as it is rare.

We shall relate at this point, as being in its natural place, another fact which is not clearly dated in the memoirs we are using. Whether through the light of his natural perspicacity or through an inspiration from on high, De La Salle foresaw that the enterprising Adrian Nyel, as quick to lose interest in the schools he had begun as to found new ones, would sooner or later leave all of them to him to look after when Nyel became tired of doing so himself. He felt, therefore, that he needed to provide for a sufficient number of teachers to man the schools. How indeed could he maintain these existing establishments if he had nobody to replace Nyel whenever he went off, for like a meteor he disappeared as suddenly as he reappeared?

Nyel's procedures involved consequences that the pious canon feared. By assuming the responsibility for providing teachers when vacancies occurred, De La Salle would be taking on the management of the schools as well as the direction of the teachers. This meant undertaking a work which he valued and loved indeed, but which he wanted only to have a free and voluntary connection with, apart from any definite engagement or obligation. On the one hand, he feared that Nyel's schools would fail; on the other, he could foresee that if he did not have teachers ready to replace this man who dashed about from place to place, he would see deterioration swiftly follow the foundation of the schools.

In his perplexity he decided to make a retreat to beg God for enlightenment and to discover His holy will. To make this retreat in deeper recollection and silence he rented a small garden near the Augustinian church, next to the city ramparts. This spot was the first witness of his transports of fervor and of his mortifications. After having given his orders to his household and left word at the community of Sisters entrusted to him by Canon Roland, he withdrew into solitude, letting his spirit plunge undistractedly into mental prayer and practicing mortification without sparing his body.

"Ah," declares the memoir which we are transcribing here, "if the walls of the tiny room which he used as his cell could speak, what would they not tell us of the bloody disciplines and other pious excesses which he yielded to as a result of the spiritual inebriation which the 'new wine' produces in those who begin to drink deep of it!" The blood which bespattered this little cell gave testimony to the holy cruelty with which he treated his flesh and to the sacrifices he made for God. There, at the start of a truly new life, he drew up a first plan for the most sublime perfection he hoped to realize.

During this time the founding of the gratuitous schools at Bethel made the people at Guise revive their project of having similar ones in their city. We

mentioned above that their initial plan had fallen through because Nyel had wanted to go too fast and had not followed the advice of De La Salle. Now the request was made again, and the matter was satisfactorily arranged. The officials of the city provided a house for the masters, and Mademoiselle de Guise endowed the gratuitous schools, which opened that same year, 1682. Others were established at Chateau Porcien in July the same year and at Laon at the end of the year.

The circumstances of this last foundation were as follows. The pastor of Saint Pierre-le-vieux in that city, hearing of the great good produced by the gratuitous schools, felt that they could nowhere be of greater utility than in his parish, since the majority of his parishioners were poor. His eagerness to provide for their instruction and his desire to enrich with spiritual blessings those who were deprived of the gifts of fortune incited him to write to De La Salle, begging him for two of his disciples. Nyel was as enthusiastic for this new establishment as he had been for the previous ones. His impetuosity on this occasion, however, gave Divine Providence an opportunity to deliver De La Salle from a man who was certainly a good person in his own way but who by reason of his temperament could never have adopted John Baptist's spirit or conformed to the latter's manner of living.

At this time Nyel was at Guise, where he had gone after a six months' stay at Rethel. From Guise he went to Laon where he found everything in readiness for the opening of the schools. The city fathers, in fact, did not limit themselves to giving permission for the foundation; they furnished the schoolmasters with a residence and contributed to their maintenance. They were joined in their good work by the Abbot of Saint Martin and the pastor of Saint Peter's, who later became a canon of the Cathedral and who is still living. This foundation was made in 1683. The pastor took advantage of this opportunity to establish a fast friendship with De La Salle, in whom he felt an unbounded confidence and whose virtue he admired. Nyel opened the school and remained there for two years. That was a long time for a man of his character.

Not surprisingly, at the end of this time he took it into his head to return to Rouen. But how could he manage to do this? He had taken over the direction of the schools in Rethel, Guise and Laon. To lay aside his obligations in an honorable way, he decided to place the three establishments into the care of De La Salle. For this reason, in 1685 he visited the canon in Rheims and begged him most earnestly to accept his resignation as head of these schools. The pastor of Saint Peter's in Laon, who desired this solution as much as Nyel did, joined him in his request. At first De La Salle was firm in his refusal; he did not give in until he saw that these schools would be abandoned by the man who had founded them.

While the pious canon busied himself entirely with the care of his little flock, Satan was devising ways of scattering his sheep a second time. Knowing full well, thanks to his profound malice and his long experience, that the greatest evil, like the greatest good, often begins in a very small way, he thought up another scheme to cause this work to perish before it really got

started. He foresaw that it would develop to his detriment and was beginning to fear the progress it was making.

The way to succeed in his endeavor was to tempt the masters to leave the community by dangling before their eyes various marvellous prospects which the human spirit would tend to consider as unquestionable realities. He had already succeeded in this once before. By using similar enticements he had managed to get nearly all the first companions of De La Salle to leave him. If he could only make the same device work a second time, he felt sure that he could destroy the infant Institute. Indeed, if the malice of Satan had achieved his aim nobody could speak of the Institute today; it would have been wrecked by a second wholesale exodus of the teachers.

The devil, therefore, put forth renewed efforts to sift these men, as Jesus Christ said, even as one sifts wheat, and to do so a second time, since he had succeeded so well before. But he did not use exactly the same strategy.

The first schoolmasters, accustomed to a free and easy life, had initially found the practice of obedience and the observance of a rule easy enough; but little by little the devil had managed to enfeeble their wills and to extinguish by boredom and ennui the first sparks of fervor which had been enkindled in their hearts. The continual and uniform round of pious exercises had impressed them at first; but later it seemed too constraining. Feeling their liberty too restricted and their senses too closely restrained, they dreamed only of throwing off a yoke which the evil spirit represented to them as destined to grow heavier day by day till it became really intolerable.

But while the devil was busy, De La Salle, who had realized the potential problems faced by the teachers, did not remain idle. He did all that under such circumstances a man of God filled with zeal could do. It is easy to imagine what he felt in a situation of this kind. As a vigilant superior and a tender father he had told these men struggling in the grasp of temptation everything that the Spirit of God had suggested to him, hoping in this way to show them the true face of the temptation and how to overcome it. This charitable physician of souls had used every means at his disposal--kindness, exhortations, warnings, predictions about the future--in order to heal the wounds that the malice of the devil was inflicting on these simple souls. His concern over such regrettable developments did not allow him a moment's repose.

Seeing his sheep ready to take to their heels and to withdraw from the vigilance of their shepherd made his heart break. The masters, though, had made up their minds, and it was in vain that he spoke. His tears of fatherly tenderness were as useless as his friendly reproaches. Men capable of forgetting God could not be expected to remember the benefits they had received from De La Salle and the duties they had assumed in his regard. Men resolved to assert their own will and to prefer their own freedom were not likely to consider as a wise counsellor and a true friend a man who proposed to them nothing but the slavery of the Gospel.

Thus, De La Salle witnessed their desertion after observing their disturbed lives. What anguish it caused him to see these first followers, like the Prodigal Son, leave his house and thus tear themselves away from his arms! With sorrow he beheld the vessel on the point of foundering when he had just laid his hands on the tiller. Surely his reaction is not hard to understand. Amazed, and almost disconcerted to find himself abandoned by all except one or two of the schoolmasters, he could have addressed them in the words of Christ, "Will you too go away?"

When the zealous canon had taken over this work, for which he felt no natural inclination, he had in view nothing but the instruction of the poor and the good of the Church. It would seem that he should have had a right to expect better cooperation. But, O depths of God's judgments! God puts His glory only in the carrying out of His will, in submission to His providential decrees; that is where we must seek it. Although God may inspire His servants to undertake great works to honor Him, still He very often permits these to end in difficulties, and sometimes in ruin, or at least be on the brink of ruin, so that later on He can revive them with all the more glory for Himself.

He it is Who permits death and gives back life, Who leads down to death, and Who calls back from the grave. A hundred times, at His death and after His Resurrection, the little flock of Jesus Christ was dispersed, scattered, and on the slope leading to destruction; and a hundred times it revived with renewed vigor. Because all God's works pass through similar trials, it was no wonder that this one had to experience them as well.

Enlightened as to God's ways, De La Salle did not lose courage on this occasion. He gathered together the remnant of his little flock on which all his hopes rested. He spared neither care, advice, exhortation nor acts of devotedness to preserve these few from the bad example of those who had left. His efforts were not in vain; his tears themselves were soon wiped away. He had reason to praise and bless God when he saw a number of new recruits possessing talent, health and good will come to repeople his little community and to replace the deserters.

He set about forming a new group, more numerous than the previous one, which he was able to regulate even better than before. Having to work with new subjects only, he did not have to begin by correcting the defective attitudes that the free and easy existence under Nyel had caused the other to acquire. This time he had the consolation of discovering that he was sowing the seed in good earth.

All he needed to do was to warn his men against their natural inconstancy, a weakness that the ones who had left had taught him to fear. Persuaded that the best means of making them staunch in their vocation was to strengthen them in virtue, he had put forth every effort to help them acquire it. The result corresponded with his labor as his disciples made great progress in piety, thanks to his example and his teaching. He himself made even greater headway through his fidelity to grace and his docility in letting himself be led by the Spirit of God. He was one of those generous souls who, far from refusing God anything, give Him everything He wants as soon as He asks for it.

Still, in spite of all his care and vigilance, he could not protect his disciples from the most insidious of all temptations, the most cunning and subtle with which the evil spirit could bedazzle them, except by becoming an example of poverty himself, and by seeking in a general renunciation of all his worldly goods an effective remedy against the deceits of the seductor. It was not love of liberty, the tedium of a constraining life, or disrelish for exercises of piety that the devil used to cause trouble a second time among the zealous canon's little flock and to bring about yet another exodus. Now it was concern for their future and the fear of lacking the necessities of life some day.

These misgivings are found in all men who are not established in perfect confidence in God; this diffidence is like a hidden worm which attacks the best disposed wills and makes them give up the loftiest ideals when pure charity has not taken possession of them. It was easy for the malevolent spirit to use this angle of approach and to take by surprise these men who were still novices in virtue. Certainly, by assailing their hearts on this, their weakest point, he would have conquered them sooner or later in spite of the prayers and remonstrances of De La Salle, if the latter had not countered the ruse of the tempter by a heroic example of detachment and by embracing poverty voluntarily.

What led to this decision on his part was the rather curt answer he received from some of the schoolmasters who were strongly tempted to leave their state and to seek in another a surer refuge against poverty. Living on the bare necessities, without fixed incomes or revenues of their own, they could look forward only to an uncertain future, and their gnawing anxiety allowed them to see no resource to fall back on in their old age other than shameful beggary. The devil played upon their imaginations, exaggerating the motives for their concern and showing them vivid pictures of their future existence.

If illness or incapacity were to overtake them, their lot would be the poorhouse. As a reward for all their work, as a compensation for the youth and energy which they had lavished on a sterile and unrewarding task, they could expect sooner or later to be reduced to a state of penniless indigence in which they would not be guaranteed even a crust of bread for their declining years.

"True," they said to one another as they discussed the harassing doubts which obsessed them, "we can hope to find a sure haven from such poverty in the generosity of our father, as long as he lives. But when he dies, what then? As long as we put our trust in his charity, we shall find in his good heart and in his wealth a bulwark against beggary. But he may die tomorrow; and once he is gone what will become of the schools he is supporting? What will become of us teachers whom he provides for and whose father he is? Where can we go? What can we do when De La Salle is no longer with us?"

Such were the questions they asked one another and which the devil kept repeating to them so that they could not dismiss them from their thoughts. These concerns, ever present to their minds, admitted neither reply nor contradiction. A thousand fears arose which discouraged them, made them less enterprising in

their work, and cast them into somber melancholy. Their vigilant Superior, who kept watch over all the motions of their hearts and who read their most secret dispositions, did not take long to discover the source of the trouble which the wicked spirit kept stirring up day after day.

To help the Brothers overcome their temptations, he joined prayers to tender exhortations so as to build up their confidence in God and their abandonment to Providence. But their souls remained insecure, like half-ruined houses which people try to prop up and which, standing thanks only to supports from without, continue to fall into decay. Thus the schoolmasters, scarcely recovered from their first bout of discouragement, fell back into it and kept eyeing the door.

The reason for their continued restlessness was that they had not yet told him everything they had on their minds. The fact was that they had a ready answer to all the exhortations their Superior addressed to them on the subject of abandonment to Providence. As yet, respect and a certain diffidence had kept them from making their position plain. Their observation, although true enough, was not very considerate; they feared it might offend a man who was so good to them and about whom they had no complaint to make.

But these forthright peasants, who had never cultivated the art of dissimulation, could not keep back forever the reply that they had on the tips of their tongues--an answer as straightforward as it was telling. Although not very courteous, it did have a ring of truth about it. Because of its apparent sincerity, it was able to produce all the effect that God intended it to have. However, they kept quiet for some time. During this period when their tongues did not as yet reveal the workings of their minds, the wealthy canon kept insisting on confidence in God and exhorting them thereto by quoting the very words of the Gospel on full abandonment to the care of Providence.

"Men of little faith," he said, "by your lack of trust you set limits to a Goodness that has no limits in itself. If that Goodness is indeed infinite, universal, and continual (as you do not doubt), It will always take care of you and never fail you. You seek assurance, but does not the Gospel provide it? The words of Jesus Christ are your insurance contract; there is no contract more reliable because He has signed it with His blood; He has affixed to it the seal of His infallible truth. Why, then, do you grow distrustful? If the positive promises of God cannot calm your uneasiness and your concern for your future, what is the point of looking for stocks that will produce a comparable income?"

"Consider the lilies of the field, for it is Jesus Christ Himself Who urges you to reflect on them and on the wild flowers of the countryside, and to see how richly God has adorned them and beautified them. They lack nothing, yet Solomon himself in all his glory was less splendidly attired. Open your eyes and see the birds that fly through the air or the little animals which creep upon the ground: not a single one of them lacks what is needed. God provides for their necessities. Possessing neither cellars nor barns, they find everywhere the food that Providence has prepared for them. They do not sow or reap, yet they find their sustenance. The heavenly Father takes care of them. If His generous and kindly concern extends to even the least insects which men

trample underfoot and to even the grass that dries out and serves as fuel for the fire, how can you believe, O men of little faith, that He to Whom you consecrate your labor will abandon you in your old age and leave you to finish in misery a life spent in His service?

"Therefore, stir up your trust in His infinite goodness and honor Him by leaving in His hands the care of your persons. Be not troubled about the present or disquieted about the future, but be concerned only about the moment you must now live. Do not let anticipation of tomorrow be a burden on the day that is passing. What you lack in the evening the morrow will bring you, if you know how to hope in God. God will work miracles rather than let you suffer want. In addition to the words of Jesus Christ, I offer you as proof the universal experience of the saints. Providence performs miracles daily and they cease only for those who have no trust."

Such true words might have been decisive if he who uttered them with such conviction had been as poor as he was virtuous. But the speaker was a wealthy canon. Because in a rich prebend and in his own family fortune he enjoyed a secure refuge against indigence, he lacked the grace to persuade others to forget their own interests entirely. It was easy for him to talk about perfect abandonment to Providence. He himself had nothing to worry about, and Providence had provided him abundantly, not only with the necessities of life, but even with the superfluous. Before he could address others in this language of perfection, he had to come down to the level of those he was addressing.

Once John Baptist had divested himself of everything, his benefice and his family inheritance, and had given the example of total trust in Providence, his words would be heeded. They would prove effective if backed up by his example. Words can be resisted; specious arguments can contradict sound ones; miracles can be doubted or at least questioned. But example admits of no reply. It is a force which carries its own evidence within itself and forestalls all quibbles.

The pious canon's disciples felt high esteem and veneration for his virtue. The deeds of humility, mortification, recollection and charity which they saw him perform every day had won for him their entire confidence. Still, he was a rich man. As long as from the shelter of his well-provided-for situation he attempted to inspire them with courage to face old age, illness, infirmity and the uncertainty inseparable from them, he could neither find much of a hearing nor expect them to aspire to the heroic degree of abandonment which they had not yet seen exemplified in his person.

This dichotomy left the devil an opportunity to undermine the power of the canon's words in their souls. Satan kept reminding them that the one who spoke so eloquently of abandonment to Providence was a wealthy man and that if he were in the same condition as they he might not talk quite so loftily of such high perfection. He might even be the first to want to make sure that he had something to eat in his later years.

Tired of simply thinking these thoughts, one day the schoolmasters summoned up their courage to the point of coming out with their grievance and gave De La Salle one of those blunt, direct replies that the heart feels is unanswerable.

"You speak inspiringly amid your ease," they told him, "for you lack nothing. You have a rich canonry and an equally fine inheritance; you enjoy security and protection against indigence. If our work fails, you risk nothing. The ruin of our enterprise would not affect you. We own nothing. We are men without possessions or income or even a trade to fall back on. Where can we go, and what can we do if the schools fail, or if people tire of us? Destitution will be our only portion and begging our only means to relieve it."

Although neither courteous nor gracious, this reply contained enough truth to penetrate an upright heart. De La Salle had not expected such a remark. Because unforeseen, it proved all the more effective. His self-love did not deceive him. The schoolmasters' reproach was indeed ungracious, but he paid no attention to their manner but only weighed its veracity. His probity forced him to admit that they had been right in speaking to him thus. The Holy Spirit joined His voice to theirs and called to him even more clearly and vehemently in the depths of his heart.

He saw that he really had nothing to reply and that only giving up all his worldly goods would afford them a proof that his heart had spoken when his lips had uttered such beautiful thoughts about abandonment to Providence. He would have to couple actions with his words if he wished the latter to prove effective. When he was as poor as his companions and in the same condition as they, he would have the grace to ask them to walk after him in the path of detachment from all things, forgetting all personal interests.

The remarks of the schoolmasters made De La Salle think seriously and plunged him into much perplexity. On the one hand, to make himself as poor as they and to become by choice what they were by necessity, to resign his canonry and give away his family fortune in order to devote himself to a work still in its infancy and which he would have to undertake without any firm assurance of the results, was certainly a foolhardy choice in the eyes of human prudence. Even in the eyes of faith it deserved serious reflection.

On the other hand, if he remained rich and well provided for while dealing with men who were poor and lacking in resources, he would have to refrain from speaking to them about disregarding the future, about not being concerned over the precautions the future calls for. He would have to give up his exhortations on abandonment to Providence, which would mean leaving his followers defenseless against the wiles of the Evil One who was attacking them precisely at this, the weak spot in their armor. Then what would become of his little flock? No doubt Satan was going to disperse it again, and this second desertion would be a second victory for him.

If Satan managed to get this group of teachers to follow the example of their predecessors, his triumph would be complete. By smothering it in its cradle, he

would have brought about the destruction of an undertaking which he had begun to fear. Such were the various considerations which occupied De La Salle and which threw him into great perplexity. In the following chapter we shall see how he magnanimously overcame these doubts, thanks to a generous resolution to give up all things after the example of the Apostles, to resign his canonry and renounce his personal wealth in order to attach himself to Jesus Christ naked on the Cross.

Chapter XII

De La Salle Weighs the Reasons for Giving up His Canonry;
the Reasons Which Lead Him to This Generous Resolution.
He Makes the Decision, but Does Not Venture
to Carry It Out Until He Has Been Authorized to
Do So by His Spiritual Director.

The spirited and unadorned answer that the schoolmasters had given to their Superior was not one of those replies which disconcert a person momentarily and bring about only a passing disturbance in the mind. It impressed the canon so deeply that it could not be effaced. The first effect it produced was to make him think deeply about the matter. After thought came deliberations and consultations. The final effect was the actual renunciation.

The first idea which occurred to the pious canon was to use his inherited wealth to endow the schools. What better use could he make of it? His relatives were rich and did not need any legacies from him to lead comfortable lives. "If you wish to be perfect," said Jesus Christ, "go, sell all that belongs to you; give it to the poor." Give it to whom? To one's relatives? If they needed it, then charity rightly understood would make this a duty, for charity requires order, and order gives first place among the poor to one's needy relatives. Duly ordered charity would begin with one's family if one were to distribute the alms which the desire for perfection would lead one to divest oneself of.

But if relatives are well-to-do, must one give them the sums raised by the sale of one's goods, as the Gospel advises? No. Such giving would only be a burden to them with superfluous wealth which might prove an occasion of spiritual loss. It would simply be giving them a deposit which they would have to pass on to the poor, who really ought to receive the alms from the first owner; for, as Jesus Christ says, "Give it to the poor." What a lesson for the century in which we live! The world does not want to hear such instructions. What outcries are raised by families which feel themselves robbed of whatever is given to the poor, to the Church, or to good works!

Still, the faithful practice of this counsel was common in the early Church. If we wish to condemn this manner of acting, we must challenge an infinite number of saints. If their example is not to be imitated today, then we must conclude that the evangelical counsels are subject to the prescription of time. No one

can deny, therefore, that the decision which De La Salle made at this time and which he carried out in fact by giving away his fortune to the poor finds its justification in the Gospel and in the examples left us by the saints. If De La Salle had destined his wealth for the endowment of Christian and gratuitous schools, he would have fulfilled all his aims.

1) His action would have been directed entirely to the spiritual advantage of the poor.

2) It would have reassured his disciples and made them proof against the temptation which troubled them and which, like a gnawing worm, was secretly undermining and weakening their vocation and their good dispositions.

3) It would have reduced them to silence and, thanks to his heroic example of detachment, it would have authorized him to give them lessons about perfection in regard to poverty and renunciation of all things.

4) It would effectively have deprived him of his goods and in so doing would have made him truly like his poor followers.

5) Finally, it would not have forced him to change his state of life; he could still have remained a canon and at the same time Superior of the new community.

Thus, his first thought was to divest himself of his family fortune, not of his prebend. If the first transaction could not be accomplished without bringing down on his head a multitude of hardships, the second involved even greater difficulties and inconveniences. Thus De La Salle at first did not consider it. But Divine Providence changed the order of his resolves and led him to begin by resigning his canonry.

The instrument that the Holy Spirit employed to second by his counsels the secret inspirations He gave the canon was Father Barré. This saintly Minim was the person who had previously established Christian and gratuitous schools. It was then only natural for John Baptist to seek the advice of a man who enjoyed special grace in this matter.

As was to be expected, Barré approved the canon's project, so pious and disinterested that it won his high praise and wholehearted backing. But De La Salle's design, while admirable in itself, was not sufficiently inclusive in the eyes of the saintly Minim. Because he wanted Christian Schools to depend on nothing but Divine Providence itself, he had no use for endowments. He believed that the best and surest reliance was to abandon oneself to the care of our heavenly Father and that the Christian schools would be compromised if they were endowed.

"Foxes have holes," he said in this connection, quoting Our Lord, "the birds of the sky have their nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to rest His head." This is how Father Barré commented on these words: "Who are these foxes mentioned

in the sacred text? They are the children of the world who attach themselves to the goods of this earth. Who are the birds of the sky? The religious who find a refuge in their cells. But for schoolmasters and mistresses whose vocation is to instruct the poor after the example of Jesus Christ, there is no other portion on this earth than that which fell to the Son of Man. Divine Providence must be the only foundation on which Christian schools are established. Any other does not suit them. This one is solid, and the schools themselves will remain stable so long as they have no other reliance."

Father Barré was not a man to tell the truth by halves. Speaking to De La Salle, he advised that he should give away his fortune, then he should resign his canonry so that he might be able to devote himself entirely to this work which required his undivided attention, and to provide his disciples with a model of total renunciation and perfect abandonment. The Superior would not draw down these graces on his followers until he had given them the example. Although such advice was certainly not very inviting, it came from on high and could not have been inspired by flesh and blood. God, its real author, disposed the heart of the virtuous canon to accept it by whispering to his heart the same advice that the saintly Minim was telling him exteriorly.

De La Salle, however, did not like to rush into things and did not wish to do anything without the advice of his ordinary director of conscience. He let these projects of evangelical perfection mature and contented himself with watering them with his tears and nourishing by his prayers these precious seeds which had been sown in his soul. At first the pious canon, deeply impressed by the advice given him by Father Barré, thought carefully about what he should do. He brought his reflections and considerations to the foot of his crucifix, asking God for His light and offering himself to Him for the fulfillment of His designs. The more he pondered the divine will, the more it seemed necessary to make himself poor so as to become like his disciples.

The following are the reasons which convinced him and which he kept repeating to himself:

- 1) "I have been reduced to silence. As long as I am not poor myself, I have no right to talk the language of perfection as I used to on the subject of poverty. I cannot speak of abandonment to Providence so long as I am comfortably insured against penury, nor about perfect confidence in God if my sound investments leave me no reason for worry.
- 2) "If I remain what I am, and the schoolmasters remain what they are, their temptation will persist because what produces it will continue to subsist. I will not be able to remedy it because they will always find in my wealth an obvious and even plausible argument to justify their doubts about the present and their concern for the future.
- 3) "Sooner or later such a temptation, so justifiable in appearance, will not fail to produce the effect that the devil hopes it will

achieve. The teachers, whether in a group or one by one, will forsake me, leaving my house empty for the second time and the schools without anyone capable of conducting them.

- 4) "This desertion will make a good deal of noise in the city. It will frighten off any who might have entertained the idea of becoming schoolmasters. Their vocation will wither; even before they enter they will be seized by the same misgivings as those who have just left.
- 5) "Without a stable staff of teachers, the schools will fail. In this case, the heirs of the foundations will claim the funds contributed for their maintenance.
- 6) "Thus, little by little the institution of Christian and gratuitous schools will be buried beneath its ruins, and it will be useless ever to think of reviving it.
- 7) "Even supposing that all these results do not follow, must I, can I even, act as the superior of these schoolmasters without giving up my canonry? How can I combine my assiduous presence in the house, so as to be at their head during the exercises of piety and to keep watch over them, with attendance in the choir for the canonical Office? Are these two positions compatible? If not, I must give up one or the other.
- 8) "True, a canon's prebend is not in itself an obstacle to good works; and sedulous attendance at the Office to chant God's praises does not prevent one from rendering other services to the Church or from devoting oneself to the salvation of souls. One can divide one's time between these two noble functions and prove that a canon does not have to be idle outside the choir. He does not need to seek in this title a plausible pretext to leave the choir only to enter upon a rest that lasts all day, to grow stout in sweet indolence, and to do no work in the Lord's vineyard. But can I at the same time be a good canon and a faithful superior of a community which requires my presence constantly? If I fulfill this latter function properly, I will have to omit all the duties of the former, since if I must always be in the house I can never be in the choir. If these two duties cannot be reconciled, I must choose between them. Five or six hours a day spent in reciting the Divine Office would make too great an inroad on the assiduous presence which I owe to the house I direct.
- 9) "Now, in the choice I must make, what should be my determining consideration? What shall make the balance tip? The greater glory of God, the fuller service of the Church, my own higher perfection, and the salvation of souls: such are the ends I must propose to myself and the aims which must govern my choice.

If I consider only these exalted motives, I must resign my canonry and devote myself to the care of the schools and to the training of the schoolmasters who direct them.

- 10) "Finally, since I no longer feel any attraction to the vocation of a canon, it would seem that it has already left me even before I have given up this state of life. This calling is no longer for me. While I entered it through the right gate indeed, it seems to me that God is opening another door before me today so that I may leave it. The same voice that called me to it seems to be calling me elsewhere. I hear this in the depths of my conscience; this voice speaks when I consult my conscience. True, since the hand of God put me in the state in which I now am, His hand must take me out of it. But is He not showing me clearly enough today another state that deserves the preference and towards which He is leading me by the hand?"

To tell the entire truth, De La Salle considered the canon's function in itself as one of the least significant in the Church. We state this only because he has said so in so many words in the Memoir mentioned previously. He wanted to be fully a priest and to exercise all the priestly functions. He felt that he was burying the talents conferred on him at his ordination and letting lie idle the powers that he had received with the priestly character if he confined himself to the recitation of the Divine Office. Indeed, a canon who is a priest endowed with health, knowledge, talent and edifying conduct, but who limits himself to the simple duty of punctually assisting at the Office, does not seem to fulfill all those obligations which the priesthood imposes on him. He leaves unproductive a part of the powers he received by the imposition of the bishop's hands for the good of the diocese where he resides. Should he refuse to help a diocese which provides for him and the prelate who governs it, if he can help?

If today the title of canon dispenses many from an active ministry, it can be said that such was not always the case. If we go back to the beginning, we shall find that every priest was the bishop's helper, employed in the ministry and dedicated to the cultivation of the Lord's vineyard under the bishop's eyes and at his orders. At the very least we must admit that only those who lack either the necessary talents or the bishop's consent are dispensed from an active ministry.

De La Salle's zeal felt too hemmed in by the exigencies of the canonical state. The sacred desire he experienced to serve the Church felt itself too constrained. Without meaning to do so, his spiritual director himself had helped make him grow disenchanted with a state which did not provide the entire liberty he longed for so that he might devote himself entirely to the sacerdotal ministry. His attendance in the choir forced him to be absent often from his house and for lengthy periods. Yet his presence in the house was most necessary. His director did not wish to see John Baptist neglect his duty as a vigilant superior of his community even to be a good canon. Yet, as we shall soon see, he strongly op-

posed the proposal that De La Salle submitted to him of resigning his canonry. He did not agree to this step until the evidence forced him to admit that it was necessary to make a choice between two incompatible roles.

All this time the docile servant of God, who obeyed blindly and who would not question the way people behaved towards him, tried his best to combine these two duties and to fulfill the obligations arising from them. He was present in the choir insofar as permitted by his duties: the instruction and guidance of his disciples, the running of the schools and the necessary vigilance over a budding community. He attended choir, however, with a secret desire to be more free and to be relieved of an occupation which, although sacred and angelic, took up so much of the time which he wished to devote to an even more divine function.

This longing had remained with him ever since Father Roland had suggested that he exchange his canonry for a parish, and it had not been extinguished by the fact that to obey his Ordinary he had had to give up the idea. The decision of his superior had indicated God's will to him and had convinced him that he was not called either to be a parish priest or to remain a canon. Still, he persevered in this latter state and, as he himself says, awaited God's command to abandon it, not daring to leave of his own accord the place where the Lord had put him.

Thus God, Who knows how to mold the human heart with unspeakable skill, disposed this heart for His designs in a gradual and natural manner. By the mysterious operation of His grace He brought the desires of the man of God into line with His will. At this point I think of De La Salle as resembling a man who has stopped at a spot where various paths diverge. Uncertain as to which he should choose, he deliberates, he consults, he informs himself as to the one he should follow.

God seems to show it to him clearly enough; but the saintly canon, confused as it were, still cannot see that there is really only one path that God is offering him. Persuaded in the depths of his being by a sort of supernatural instinct and by a secret intimation of the divine will that he was not called to remain a canon nor to become a parish priest, he seemed determined to give himself to the development of this new work to which Divine Providence had brought him step by step without his realization, so that he might assume complete charge of it.

Finally, after much reflection in God's presence, after many prayers and consultations, it seemed evident to him, "towards the end of the year 1682," as he himself writes, "that God was calling me to take charge of the schools." Since he had to be the first at all the exercises of the community, he could not assist at the Office as assiduously as his director required him to. Convinced at last by all the reasons we have enumerated above, he made up his mind to resign his canonry. Even so, he found his spiritual director still unwilling to agree to this change.

Such a resolve finds few who approve of it. It was too unusual and extraordinary for his director hastily to give it his consent. Prudence required that he spend much time examining the principle from which this resolution stemmed and its true motive, and in determining whether it was the hasty result of a passing excess of fervor or the mature fruit of grace and of the action of the Holy Spirit.

We all need to try our motives and to examine where they come from and where they lead. We must not accept all these inspirations uncritically if we do not wish to be guided by presumption, levity, and the evil one. Not all resolutions which bear the outward marks of perfection are inspired by God. A man's own spirit often suggests to him projects which he attributes to the Spirit of God. He risks being deluded if he does not scrutinize with prudent deliberation the extraordinary inspirations he conceives. The one in question here, which began by De La Salle's renunciation of his canonry and ended by the giving up of his wealth, at first glance seemed audacious. In the eyes of human reason the decision was a startling one.

A wise director who seeks his responses not in his own special insights but takes as the guiding principle of his direction prudence enlightened by faith, could not immediately set the seal of his approval on it. Even had he been as enlightened as his penitent on this topic, wisdom would dictate that he should not give in to the first proposal and that he wait until God's will should make itself clear. In fact, a resolution which would amount to condemning oneself to the severest poverty in order to launch a work whose success was still so uncertain, the plan of which seemed so incredible to the eyes of the flesh, was indeed a strange and bold resolution.

In fact, it was heroic, provided the Spirit of God really inspired it; but it would have been vain and rash if any other motive did. For was it not indeed somewhat a tempting of God for De La Salle to leave a holy and secure state of life in order to undertake another which was uncertain, as yet ill-formed, and exposed to a thousand contradictions, a single one of which would have sufficed to ruin it? And in this case, what would happen to the ex-canon? What further role could he play in the world after having failed as a schoolmaster?

Put to so severe a test, would his virtue not be in danger of succumbing? Would his fall not be proportionate to the heights he had reached? His failure as ill-omened as his elevation had been in vain? How often has not a secret but pervasive hypocrisy masked itself under a gaudy type of virtue? If De La Salle's project were to fail, what would he be reduced to? No doubt to the direst want, for which of his relatives would feel inclined to provide for the necessities of a man who had become a pauper of his own free will, one who had given to the poor the wealth which he could have distributed among his own relatives? If some such misfortune were to overtake him, the canon who insisted on becoming a schoolmaster, all he could do would be to try to earn his living by selling his labor as other men do and setting a price on the lessons he had fondly hoped to make gratuitous and wholly Christian.

After all, could De La Salle not save his soul in the state where Divine Providence had placed him? If he was so eager to attain perfection, what obstacle did he find thereto in being a canon? The edifying conduct he had thus far displayed was certainly a pledge of what his life in the future would be. Judging the future by the past, could he not promise himself that he would certainly contrive to sanctify himself, without running the risk of illusion and of being deceived by a notion of perfection, dazzling indeed but false? If he was so eager to exercise his ministry for the service of the Church, could he not find enough activity to satisfy his zeal by following the example of Father Roland in the confessional, in the spiritual direction of souls, in the government of the communities he was already in charge of, in preaching God's word from the pulpit or in distributing this heavenly nourishment to the little ones by giving them simple catechetical instructions.

All these tasks he had already managed to combine with his duties as a canon. Since his vocation was not doubtful and he had entered the ecclesiastical state and the ranks of the canons of the Cathedral through perfectly legitimate paths, since he fulfilled the obligations of his profession so punctually, what had he to fear? Why did he not remain peaceably what he was by his state and by God's calling: a good canon and a good priest?

All these considerations were weighty and justified his director in making De La Salle put off the carrying out of his resolution. Foreseeing all the problems that would arise from such an extraordinary decision, the director was uneasy about its consequences. A step of this nature could hardly be taken without causing a good deal of unrest and gossip. It would generate much disturbance, and the criticism would eventually fall back on the director himself for counselors usually have to share a large part of the blame that people visit on those under their direction.

The world imagines that penitents hear nothing but the voice of their confessors and act only in accordance with their orders--although in practice this happens very seldom and only in the case of very docile souls, who are few indeed. The world, however, blames everything on the director and never fails to hold him responsible for the actions, whether holy or ill-advised, that his penitents carry out. The wave of slanderous criticism which De La Salle had stirred up when he brought the schoolmasters to stay in his house and had begun living with them had not completely subsided; it foreshadowed other onslaughts, even more furious, if he were to cease being a canon in order to become more like his followers.

Then, in whose favor should he resign his canonry? This was another question which was bound to bring up more difficulties. The virtuous canon had a brother, Louis, who was an ecclesiastic, the only one of his family who had remained steadfast at his side, the one who shared his life with the schoolmasters in spite of the objections of the family. If John Baptist did not leave his canonry to this deserving younger brother, what would people say? What outcries would fill the city from end to end? What would his outraged family not resort to?

But a man who was already beginning to walk so courageously in the footsteps of the saints was hardly one to listen to the voice of flesh and blood or to confirm by his example the pernicious custom of treating the emoluments attached to the service of the Church as part of his family inheritance. Because all these difficulties were obvious enough, once again it was certainly not wise for De La Salle's director to give his immediate consent to the proposal made to him by his penitent regarding his resignation from the Chapter.

Docile, humble, obedient, De La Salle was therefore obliged to put off his project before coming to a final conclusion in a matter of such great importance to his purposes and his circumstances. The virtuous canon, who still felt strongly constrained by grace, was thus prevented by obedience from following its inspiration. Unwilling to have anything to reproach himself with, he remained resolved to adopt all possible means to discover God's will. On the one hand, he feared to resist the Holy Spirit and to silence His voice by listening to human reason; on the other hand, in his diffidence and modesty he dreaded to be deceived by mistaking for God's inspiration some phantom of his own imagination or some deceptive scheme originating in the evil spirit, who is so skillful in counterfeiting God's action.

To overcome this new perplexity, De La Salle found no better way than to consult the wisest and most enlightened persons in the kingdom. He made a trip to Paris, but instead of finding his difficulties resolved, he saw them compounded on account of the various opinions he received from those whom he consulted. Some encouraged while others opposed the resolution he had formed of resigning his canonry.

On his return he gave a detailed account of his consultations to his director. These interviews only added to De La Salle's irresolution because his director, seeing that his opinion was shared by several of the enlightened priests De La Salle had consulted, grew all the more convinced of the rightness of his own position and even forbade his penitent to think any more of his generous design. Such advice, however, was beyond the capacity of the virtuous canon, for the thought followed him everywhere. The Holy Spirit who inspired it constantly recalled it to his mind and kept urging him to implement it. Under such inner compulsion he kept coming back to the subject and with pious insistence begged his director to agree to his plan.

During the nine or ten months which this sort of debate lasted, every day seemed to bring to the pious canon a new motive for resigning his prebend, or perhaps the same reasons impressed him more strongly day after day. In mentioning them to his confessor, he tried to give them as much cogency in the latter's mind as they had assumed in his own. Finally, to secure a favorable decision he joined with his own solicitations those of another ecclesiastic who was living with him and who pointed out to the director with total clarity the impossibility of conciliating the two positions John Baptist was trying to do justice to. The director finally gave in to these arguments and to his penitent's desires, but only after this long and serious examination.

I have almost forgotten to state that of all those whose advice De La Salle had sought, Father Barré was the one who most strongly backed him in his resolve to renounce his canonry and to give up his patrimony so that he might abandon himself to God's Providence exclusively, as he was urging those to do to whom he was affording such perfect lessons on this subject. Father Barré, a saintly religious, was one of those men who cannot abide mediocrity and who always incite those who consult them to aim at the most perfect, at least when they deal with souls as noble and magnanimous as that of the pious canon. We cannot too highly respect the admirable docility of De La Salle's truly lofty soul, ever ready for total sacrifice. Without reasoning, without arguing, without objecting, he heeded the oracles which the Holy Spirit supplied him with by the mouth of the holy religious and submitted thereto with respect.

Called like the Apostles to leave everything for Jesus Christ, his heart gave its consent as soon as this sacrifice was proposed to him. From that moment on he tried to hasten its execution insofar as obedience to his director of conscience allowed. What generosity, what faithfulness to grace, what devotedness to evangelical perfection! John Baptist cared for nothing; nothing could stop him--neither his wealth nor the amenities of a comfortable life. He laid it all down with the same promptness with which one might lay aside a useless piece of furniture or a heavy burden. He reminds me of the publican, Matthew, who at the first word spoken to him by Jesus Christ arose and followed Him, forgetting how rich he had been, happy and proud to be able to offer God the sacrifice of all he had and of all he was by generously exchanging his worldly goods for the poverty of Jesus Christ.

Could such a step, so distasteful to nature, have been due to ambition or the desire to make a name for himself in the world? Such a motive is what certain unfair and prejudiced censors taxed him with at the time. If they had been willing to look into their own hearts and to study their own inclinations, they would have discovered that such resolutions can only come from on high, and that to call such a proposal ambitious was to attribute to Beelzebub, the prince of demons, a miracle of grace and the prodigies that only the Holy Spirit of God can bring about in souls.

Chapter XIII

How De La Salle Proceeds to Divest Himself of His Canonry,
Once His Director Permits Him to Do So.
The Opposition He Encounters and How He Overcomes It.

Our pious canon, convinced that secrecy is the key to success in one's undertakings, neglected none of the precautions that prudence suggested in order to keep his project quiet; but his care was in vain. Rumors began to spread throughout the city, from house to house. A step of this kind could hardly be taken without giving rise to considerable comment. Since it was necessary to disclose it to certain persons, and since it is impossible to count on complete

discretion on the part of all, some indiscreet tongue always betrays the secrets which his soul is incapable of preserving.

Once De La Salle's proposal was known, it is easy to imagine how it was received by the public, what criticism it provoked from his fellow canons and friends, and how much disappointment it occasioned in the De La Salle family. A "sign of contradiction," like his divine Master, John Baptist on this occasion had to experience reproaches, rash judgments and mockery from all sorts of people. The worldly concluded that he had lost his mind, had exhausted his psychic resistance by leading too retired a life and by his exaggeratedly mortified and un-social behavior. They believed that his mind was enfeebled, that he wanted to raise himself up to unprecedented heights and launch off into the empyrean, soaring above the usual flights of the perfect, in order to win a place for himself among the venerable founders of orders.

In the opinion of the worldly-wise and the politically minded who claim to see into and to probe men's characters in order to pronounce a definitive verdict on their actions, our canon, by giving up his state of life, was merely following his temperament which always led him to exaggerate everything. The irreligious, who always find ways to pour scorn on everything and who love nothing better than to mock the devout, said that John Baptist, who was sanguine and impetuous by nature, was bored with staying quietly in a state of life in which he was happy, of exercising his zeal only by singing the praises of God in a place where many simply rest and some even fall asleep in the darker recesses of the sanctuary.

The indifferent affirmed that this scheme was nothing but a passing fancy; he was letting himself be fascinated by the unusual character of an extraordinary type of life. His desire for higher perfection was just an illusion. He listened to no one's advice and followed nothing but his own ideas. How could any director, they asked, be so easy-going or so lacking in good judgment as to approve such an extravagant proposal? So spoke the world, and the pious canon let it speak on.

His fellow canons and his friends took a different tack but with the same end in view. While reproaching him in affectionate terms for wanting to leave their company, to renounce their friendship, to bid them a final adieu, they spoke to him at length about the state he was thinking of abandoning and about the one he intended to embrace. Each of them put forth all his rhetorical powers to paint in vivid colors all the advantages afforded by the first and all the drawbacks they could think of in the second.

What did they not say, going into the details of the troubles, sufferings and contrarities which he would have to face in such a lowly state to which he seemed to feel such a strong attraction? His lot was indeed to be deplored. They felt sorry for him, and they added that they could not endure the thought that he was going to throw in his fate with such rustic people and condemn himself to lead a wretched existence like them and with them for the rest of his life. Other friends, like Job's asked, "Have you dishonored your character by some secret crime? Is it to expiate this that you want to exile yourself from the company of decent people? If you wish to do penance, must you do it in a condition of sordid and wretched poverty? Can you prefer this to your present

state without dishonoring the latter, without causing people to think ill of your fellow canons and of one of the most illustrious Chapters in Christendom, because of your strange preference?"

Everyone, assuming the role of a prophet, made sure to tell him that he would not take long to repent of what he was about to do, that he would acknowledge his mistake as soon as he had committed it, but that perhaps it would then be too late to remedy it.

Since everybody was talking about the affair and wanted to have his say on the subject, even good people and the devout got involved in the debate and added their criticism to the verdict which the voice of the public pronounced against the virtuous canon. They inquired, "Does not the voice of the public reach his ears? Is he ignorant of all that is being said in the city? If he knows it, why does he not make people hush by giving up his foolish project? Should his very piety not make it a duty for him to satisfy his family which is so upset? To reconcile himself with his friends and relatives who are displeased?"

"Why does he make everyone talk about him so much? Why give the irreligious an occasion to make fun of religion and to ridicule devotion? Has he reflected sufficiently on the importance of the step he proposes to take? If after some days he is unhappy with it, regrets it, and agrees with the public in condemning it, what an embarrassment it will be for him, what a blot on his reputation for piety! If he remains firm in his resolve (which he may well do, since he is so hardheaded), what a spectacle will he not offer the world when he, a canon, becomes a schoolmaster! When he places himself at the head of a band of beggars* and becomes a beggar like them!

"In truth, is he not tempting God? Does he not realize it? Why does no one try to make him understand what he is doing? Is it possible that he alone can be blind to what is so plain to everyone else? That disregarding the future he does not foresee the wretched lot he is preparing for himself and the miserable condition into which he is going to precipitate himself? The story of his life will teach posterity, at his expense, that one must be 'wise with sobriety,' and tailor one's undertakings to fit one's strength."

Others asked, "What can our fellow-citizen be after? Some sort of chimerical perfection? I thought he had more sense! He is letting himself be led astray by pious illusions. For, after all, what is this work he is trying to start if not a pure delusion? How surprised and how embarrassed will he not be when he sees all his dreams fade into nothingness! And can any other result be expected? Suppose that he does succeed in getting this project off to a good start, does he possess enough influence and authority to ward off all the blows of misfortune and to bring his work to full development?"

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*The French, gueux is expressive of extreme contempt.

I would never end if I wished to set down everything that people said. We know well enough how worldlings can talk on such occasions. In a word, the virtuous canon had everybody against him. If he had chosen to defend himself, he would not have been able to furnish enough answers to the countless accusations made against his project. His only defense was to keep silent; as a rule this is the sole weapon that the saints resort to in similar circumstances. It was the only one used by Jesus Christ Himself. "Jesus remained silent," says the Gospel, when they accused Him and when everyone cast his vote to condemn Him. On such delicate occasions silence is the most eloquent apology; sooner or later it makes the public retract what it has said and modify its first judgment, too hastily passed. This heroic silence is the sign of innocence and the most authentic testimonial to the presence of the Holy Spirit in a soul. The more difficult and rare it is to practice such silence, the greater merit it wins.

This glorious silence was the only defense that De La Salle resorted to. I do not know whether he was much hurt by everything said about him; but if he was, he did not let it appear. No doubt, he could not help feeling the dissatisfaction and disappointment that his resolve occasioned among his relatives. While virtue opposes nature, it does not always suppress all natural feelings. A saint does not cease to be a man. In fact, one can say that the saints are more human than the rest of us in this sense: that because they have a better natural disposition, less self-love and more real charity for their neighbor, they often possess more tender and sensitive hearts, and the depth of their feelings gives to their sacrifices an added value and greater merit.

De La Salle's relatives, disconcerted and alarmed by his resolve, joined their outcries to those of the public, hoping to make him change his mind and to oblige him to avoid giving them this new reason for discontent. It was all in vain; he had chosen. Flesh and blood had not inspired him, and the Holy Spirit Who had suggested his choice gave him the courage to carry it out. If I may apply to him this eulogy of the Protomartyr, the virtuous canon "full of grace and strength" resisted all the attacks directed against him. The Holy Spirit dwelt in him; without making him insensible to the blows dealt him, He rendered him victorious over them.

For we must not imagine that, even though he seemed immovable on the outside, this generous servant of God was never interiorly disturbed when the demons joined forces with men and launched desperate efforts to make him yield. More than once he himself admitted to his disciples that at this time hell raised more storms against him than the world did, and that he would not have been able to hold out against these furious attacks if the hand of the Almighty had not been stretched out in his defense.

The devil, infinitely more clever than men in presenting to us with artful imposture the liveliest and most seductive images, tried his best to evoke in the canon's imagination the most somber tableaux of the wretched state into which he was about to hurl himself--tableaux which his friends had barely sketched. The darkest hues, applied by a supremely skillful and malignant hand, sketched such a horrible picture of the state he was going to embrace that it seemed to

him that by entering it he would be condemning himself to all the tortures of the damned and all the most terrible consequences of the direst penury until death.

It seems that the canon, already prepared to give up everything, could envision himself a penniless beggar at the head of a band of men like himself, whom an exaggerated sense of duty had led him to imitate. He saw himself the leader of a group of Brothers lacking any provision for the necessities of life other than the care of Providence and the charity of the public. He felt that along with them he would be exposed to live in sordid poverty or to seek his bread in disgraceful beggary. Hunger, thirst, heat and cold, ragged clothing, rejection, insults, infirmities and illnesses, and the endless cortege of misery and suffering which are the consequences of poverty would be his lot after he had renounced his family fortune and the revenues provided by the Church.

In addition, if he alone remained poor and miserable, he alone would suffer; but he would have to endure it all over and over again for each of the Brothers he had to provide for, since as his spiritual sons they would cause him as much heartbreak as a mother feels when she sees herself without bread or food, surrounded by her starving children.

In a word, the devil laid open before him the frightful prospect of destitution and showed him in its depths the abyss of degradation into which his indiscreet and rash decision was going to precipitate him, a gulf from which he would never be able to emerge and where nobody would pity him. For after all, added the Father of Lies, you will be the only one worthy of compassion, for the state which you are about to embrace is the natural lot of those whom you wish to emulate. They were born poor and have always lived in that condition. If they remain poor in the schoolmaster's profession, they will simply remain what they were born to be. Hardened from infancy by indigence and brought up in poverty, accustomed to a life of hardships, they scarcely feel the sting of want save when it reaches the extreme. They are used to doing without everything but the barest necessities; they can feast on short rations. But you were brought up with such tender care, nurtured on the best of everything! You have lived in the lap of luxury. You have never known what it is to be in want of anything. Your rich prebend and your family fortune have provided you with all the amenities of life. To what despair will you not be reduced when, stripped of all your wealth, you find yourself destitute and in want of all? You will not dare turn to your former friends and relatives. They are all angry with you and will enjoy seeing you drink deep of the bitter chalice of misery and misfortune which they were unable to prevent you from seeking in this new state of life which seems to charm you so much.

What will our canon do now in his agitation, trouble and affright? Will he draw back? Will he dare to go ahead towards a state which holds out the promise of nothing but woe? Will the devil succeed in causing his imagination to influence his will through fear of impending calamity and despair? God forbid that he should erect on the ruins of his confidence in God a monument to human reason and to carnal prudence! The generous canon emerged victorious from this struggle, confirmed in his resolution to give self-love a new and even deeper

wound and to strengthen his first resolution by a second one, still more heroic. The state he intends to embrace may indeed cast him into the bosom of destitution. but it will not deprive him of the usual means of relieving it. Public charity is the remedy that God has prepared for him, and begging is the voice which solicits charity. He determined to swallow the humiliation of beggary, if it should come to that.

"Well then," he replied to the devil and to himself, "if worse comes to worst the thing to do will be to go out and beg for alms; if we have to, we will do it." What a resolve for a young canon, a man of noble birth, a well-known Doctor, a minister of God's altar, well provided for, thanks to Church revenues and his own family wealth! Such a heroic determination, so contrary to self-love and to one's natural pride, was the triumph of charity. After a temptation so bravely resisted and after a victory so complete, our canon could no longer measure the progress he made in love and grace.

Finally resolved to divest himself of everything so as to walk in the footsteps of Jesus, naked and poor, he went to Paris in July, 1683, to meet with his archbishop and to request his permission to resign his canonry. He was unable to speak with him at that time, however, and a few days later the archbishop returned to Rheims.

During his short sojourn in Paris our virtuous canon met with Father De La Barmondière, the pastor of Saint Sulpice, no doubt for the purpose of conferring with this saintly man on the resolution he had taken and to receive from his lips new encouragement in carrying it out. Saints like to meet with saints, and their greatest comfort is to see their projects, which worldlings oppose and condemn, approved and encouraged by God's friends.

De La Salle mentions this meeting with Father De La Barmondière but says nothing about what took place between them concerning his new Institute, for his humility never allowed him to reveal anything that might turn to his own praise. We shall not be far wrong, however, if we surmise that the saintly parish priest gave his fullest approval to a proposal which met with such universal condemnation by the world, and that he warmly praised (a rare thing with him, as those who knew him can testify) a work which promised to give God so much glory and to procure such great benefits for the poor. We can surmise this, basing ourselves on the outcome of the conversation. Father De La Barmondière, delighted to hear of the remarkable results that the new schools were achieving in Rheims, hastened to request for his vast parish such a valuable asset, and won from De La Salle the promise that he himself would come with two of his Brothers to open a school there.

This agreement concluded to the mutual satisfaction of the two men, De La Salle left some of his belongings in Paris as a sort of pledge, hoping to return shortly and carry out his promise. But the fulfillment of the plan took longer than anyone expected. To De La Salle's great regret, he was able to keep his word only six years later. Yet in this way God was preparing, under the aegis of this saintly parish priest, an entry for the Christian Schools into the capital of the kingdom, the city which is, so to speak, the key to France, so that from there these institutions might spread to other cities.

The virtuous canon was thus obliged to go back home in order to meet with his archbishop whom he had hoped to find in Paris. He did not delay in presenting himself at the archbishop's palace, but he found the doors shut. The prelate, aware of the designs of this priest whose zeal and disinterestedness were no secret to him, sought to temporize, to give him time to reflect further on the matter, and to prevail on De La Salle to set aside his resolve. He hoped that delay might cool off his ardor and change his dispositions; and that his own remonstrances, joined with those of relatives and friends, would make John Baptist give up this project which aroused so much antagonism on all sides.

At bottom, Archbishop Le Tellier felt a great deal of esteem for the young canon whose merit and virtue he had had occasion to observe. He feared, and not without reason, that he might lose this man first for his Cathedral Chapter and later for his diocese. So he did all he could to preserve for both a man of such rare worth. At first the prelate kept the doors of his palace closed to John Baptist and tried to discourage him by repeated rebuffs, fearing to hear from De La Salle's own lips the resolution which he hoped to change.

When he finally had to listen to him, he told De La Salle that he himself agreed with the opinion of the public concerning the matter which he had come to broach to him. He hoped to dissuade him from proceeding with the plan and to bring him to lay it aside. Not succeeding in this, he finally agreed to the desire of the virtuous canon. He did so with great regret and reluctance, although he did not show it, whether because he felt it was useless, or because he did not wish to add to the canon's chagrin.

But when De La Salle had departed, the prelate spoke frankly in the presence of several persons, declaring how deeply he felt the loss of such an evangelical worker, the like of whom was not to be found in the diocese of Rheims. He showed the same attitude a few years later when the Servant of God wanted to leave Rheims and establish his Institute in Paris. At that time De La Salle found all sorts of opposition on the part of his archbishop. The prelate moved heaven and earth to keep him in the diocese, not hesitating to make him the most alluring offers in the hope of preventing his departure. Archbishop Le Tellier even went so far as to promise to endow his community if he would agree to limit his foundations to the diocese. The promise was attractive, but the Servant of God could not accept it because it would have hobbled his zeal and restricted the work he was doing for God, a work which he was inspired to spread throughout France.

De La Salle, after expressing his most respectful thanks, refused a proposal which seemed so advantageous. Because nothing but God's interests moved him, he seemed indifferent to human advantages. We have thought it proper to mention these facts at this point, getting somewhat ahead of our story, in order to justify the conduct which Archbishop Le Tellier first adopted towards the virtuous canon. He might have been accused of showing himself rather harsh if the purpose he pursued was not made clear.

At first, then, the archbishop refused to see John Baptist only because of the genuine esteem he entertained for him and through fear of losing him. He

wanted to bring him to give up his design by refusing him an opportunity of explaining it. He might have succeeded if the latter's plan had not been inspired by God. It is well known that delay and accumulated opposition end up by making men renounce the plans their minds form as well as the undertakings they begin. But God's plans only grow stronger with time, and delay does not affect their maturation.

Still, the prelate's conduct, the motives of which De La Salle did not know, led the canon to undertake further consultations, to submit his plan, which was so strongly opposed, to a new examination, and even to bring it before the judgment seat of people whom His Excellency could not suspect of partiality.

So the question was laid before new judges. The president of the panel, so to speak, was Father Philbert, a man on whom Archbishop Le Tellier relied a great deal, and one who enjoyed great influence at the chancery. He was a canon and a professor of theology at the seminary and later on became the choirmaster of the Cathedral. Marvelous to relate, when the group heard De La Salle and considered his arguments, all of them agreed to his proposal and even advised him to move his undertaking to Paris so as to avoid all the recriminations he would have to endure from his family in his native city, and also in order to establish the work in the center of the kingdom where it would be easier to recruit more candidates whom he could later dispatch all over the country.

True it is that undertakings inspired by God simply grow stronger through opposition. The Almighty's plans cannot be foiled by the schemes and opposition of men, as Gamaliel told the Jews. When God acts, everything else must yield to Him, and everything contributes to what He wishes to bring about. He sways the thoughts and wills of men. He makes whomsoever He wishes speak His own language. When He so wills, every tongue proclaims what He has inspired. We see an example of this in the case of the false prophet Balaam who, bribed to curse God's people, found his mouth filled with words which did not come from his own spirit, but rather with blessings which his heart rejected and disavowed.

This new consultation carried great weight with the archbishop and with the public. It had a profound influence on the humble canon himself, who was doing the consulting, for it completed the task of setting to rest all the doubts which the opposition of men might have caused to arise concerning the source of his resolution. It made it impossible for him to doubt any longer that the Holy Spirit was indeed its author, since He had won approval for it from people who naturally would have been expected to combat it. Eager to pursue his goal once more and to obtain the archbishop's approval for his resignation, he went back to see the prelate the day before the latter was to leave for Paris again.

As the canon found the door still shut before him, he went to the Cathedral to make a visit to an even greater Lord to Whose presence there were neither doors nor barriers nor guards to stop him. At the foot of the altar where he was free to pour out his heart, he remained in prayer for several hours. During this long supplication, surrendering to the transports of his fervor, he spent his time offering his desires to God, abandoning himself to His will, and beseeching Him to carry them out without taking into consideration his own inclinations or repugnances.

He remained too long a time in this spiritual ecstasy, motionless and as though lifeless, not to be noticed by critical eyes. One of his acquaintances, one of those false sages so numerous in the world, maliciously pitying the supposedly wretched state of this man of God, said to another person who came by: "Pray for Father De La Salle; he is losing his mind." "You are right," replied the other, wiser than the first, "he is indeed losing the spirit of the world, but filling himself with the spirit of God."

It would seem that during this long prayer God once again whispered to the heart of the canon what He had inspired His ministers to advise him, and interiorly urged him to go back to the archbishop and once more ask for the latter's approval. He did go back, and this time the doors swung open before him. The prelate listened to him kindly. The humble canon, who saw the person of Jesus Christ in his archbishop and who, entirely indifferent to what the latter would decide, only awaited his orders to execute them, opened his heart to him with simplicity and straightforwardness.

After giving him a complete and precise report on all he had done, he proposed both the plan of resigning his canonry and that of going to Paris to establish his work there in the place most favorable for insuring its success. Archbishop Le Tellier, already half-convinced, merely asked him whether he had taken advice in a matter of such consequence. De La Salle replied that he had indeed consulted many people, and that his proposal had even won the approbation of Father Philbert.

This latter, a canon, was at that very time in the choir. The archbishop sent for him. The former superior of the Rheims seminary was somewhat taken aback by the question that Archbishop Le Tellier put to him in a casual tone of voice, inquiring whether he approved of his fellow canon's resignation. He did not answer either yes or no but adroitly evaded the question, saying that John Baptist had a brother to whom he could give his prebend. "He can give it to whomsoever he likes," replied the prelate, "and I will accept his resignation."

No sooner was this long-desired reply uttered than De La Salle seized upon it. Fearing perhaps that delay might bring about some hitch, he immediately wrote out his letter of resignation, which his spiritual director signed and sealed. He then begged the archbishop to insert the name of Father Faubert as his successor. This was an ecclesiastic who enjoyed a notable reputation in Rheims at this time. His talent for preaching, which he employed with great success, combined with his strict regularity of life, had won for him considerable renown. In a word, the pious canon did not know of anyone of more distinguished merit or more worthy of his choice. Father Faubert, however, was poor and of humble extraction and for this reason was not highly thought of by those who judge men by the standards of the flesh.

If De La Salle had consulted his own personal feelings and those of nature, his canonry would not have left his family because he had a brother, Louis, who was already a cleric and capable of fulfilling the functions of a canon. But John Baptist, who like Saint Paul never heeded flesh and blood, made up his mind not to listen to those who counseled that he favor his brother for fear of making

a mistake in a matter of such moment. In order to avoid being duped by self-love and so that he might choose the worthiest candidate, he found that the safest procedure was to prefer a stranger whose merit he knew, rather than a relative who might be less capable or of doubtful ability.

But how difficult it was for him to make such a choice when the time came to do it! To prefer a stranger who was poor and of lowly origin, enjoying little social prestige, to his own brother or to some other rich and noble citizen, he needed to overcome common prejudices. He had to set aside a pernicious custom often authorized by many examples. He was obliged to surmount human respect, his family's interests, the public's outcries. More than this, he had to brave slanderous tongues, public blame, the reproaches of his fellow canons, the insults of his relatives, the scorn of the worldly-wise and the malicious comments of a multitude of dissatisfied people. Yet that is exactly what De La Salle did; nothing could move his heart already fully dominated by grace.

Consequently, we may say that this choice, under the circumstances, was truly heroic and worthy of him for he could expect it to be unwelcome not only at the archbishop's palace but also in the Chapter and in the city. It would surely provoke more bitterness and recrimination from his family. If he had wished to please man, all he needed to do was to designate his brother as his successor or to pick somebody else among the wealthy and distinguished citizens of Rheims. Such a choice would have restored his reputation among worldlings to some extent, by making his resignation less unpalatable to them. But such considerations, which might have moved a heart less docile to grace than his, arguments which are so powerful over men who act through human motives, found no entry into the mind of this priest who listened to nothing but the Spirit of God.

The surprise that the archbishop showed when the pious canon designated as his successor a man who had nothing to distinguish him except his personal merit, preferring him to his own brother, to other relatives or to the offspring of families which, at Rheims as elsewhere, begin when a child is in his cradle to scheme to secure for him a prebend at the Cathedral, did not disconcert him and did not make him modify his choice.

The archbishop, noting that the surprise he had shown did not seem to impress De La Salle, spoke to him in favor of his brother. Without wishing to dictate his choice, he tried to make John Baptist give the preference to his brother rather than to a total stranger. His hint was a strong one, especially for a man who looked upon his superiors only with the eyes of faith; but he also knew when superiors were reacting on a merely human level and when they were speaking as the instruments of the Holy Spirit. Without entering into much discussion, he cut the prelate's insistence short by these simple words: "This is not the course I was advised to take." This reply satisfied Archbishop Le Tellier, and he no longer sought to interfere with the canon's liberty.

The latter's brother, as it turned out, did not lose anything by this arrangement because John Baptist's refusal to pass on his canonry to him secured another one for him which the same prelate conferred on him of his own free will, without even being asked to do so, as though to compensate him for the supposed

loss he had suffered when John Baptist had resigned in favor of Father Faubert. This explanation was given by the archbishop himself when he bestowed a canonry on the younger De La Salle a few years later: "I am making you this present to repair the foolishness of your elder brother who gave his benefice to a man not his relative."

It is true that the choice De La Salle made did not turn out as well as he had hoped. His successor, a poor, simple priest, very zealous and hardworking, once he became a wealthy canon was eager to enjoy like others an effortless life and ample repose and lost his zeal and his love for apostolic work. But De La Salle could not foresee the future; God alone keeps that for Himself. He had based his choice, not on what Father Faubert might become later on, but on what he was at the time.

This young ecclesiastic of the diocese of Rheims, when De La Salle chose him as his successor, was the man in the diocese who seemed to be doing the greatest good and who showed the most promise for the future. If in the event he did not fulfill those hopes and gave up walking in the path of discipline and edification in which he had set out, what happened to him is only what happens every day, what has happened at all times to an infinite number of others who after beginning well finish badly.

For a certain time, however, this priest did give his benefactor much satisfaction and joy on account of the choice he had made. At first he followed in John Baptist's footsteps, joined forces with him, and started a sort of minor seminary for ecclesiastical students at the same time and in the same house where De La Salle began the Brothers' novitiate.

In all probability, as long as the Servant of God remained in Rheims, Father Faubert profited by his presence. He did not begin to grow relaxed until he lost the support of his benefactor's instructions and example. The quiet and easy lifestyle he adopted after the first few years of his hard and painful existence eventually detached him from the good works he had undertaken earlier; it made him grow corpulent, the sign of a rich prebend. It lulled him to sleep in the bosom of repose. Finally, he became so stout and heavy that it took eight or ten men to carry his coffin when he died. His death preceded by several years that of De La Salle, who experienced the chagrin of seeing his successor in the Chapter of Rheims end up in relaxation after beginning his career in fervor. If the Servant of God had been able to foresee this (he mentioned the fact himself more than once), he would not have chosen Father Faubert from among the priests, while he was doing excellent work and living as a worthy disciple of Jesus Christ and a fervent minister of the Church, in order to give him his place among the canons.

A remarkable thing is that the changes in their living habits seem to have ruined one man's health and shortened his days as the result of a soft and easy existence, whereas the extraordinary austerities and labors of the other seem to have built up his naturally frail constitution. De La Salle had been born to wealth and brought up in luxury; he might not have lived so long had he been

less penitent and less austere. Father Faubert, who had been born in poverty, would probably have lived longer if his body, accustomed to hard work and abstemious living, had not grown flaccid and obese as a consequence of too much repose and indolence.

These details, which contain some important lessons, have been placed here because if they had been related in different places as the chronological order would require, the story would have lost some of its interest and utility. So now let us come back to the account of De La Salle's resignation of his canonry.

Archbishop Le Tellier, observing the heroic virtues that De La Salle's sacrifice made plain to him, began to consider with admiration this priest whom he had treated with something resembling disdain. This prelate was not disposed to join in programs of extraordinary perfection and still less to authorize projects based on real poverty and perfect abandonment to Divine Providence. If the virtuous canon had explained that he intended to use his personal fortune to endow the schools and the revenues of his canonry to support them, this kind of language (which everybody can understand) would not have proved incomprehensible to Archbishop Le Tellier.

Such proposals would indeed have been very worthy ones, but they did not attain the sublimity of evangelical perfection. They would not have startled him but instead would have won his hearty approval. But for one to want to become poor after being rich and by one's own free choice to make the move from enjoying all the amenities of life to a state in which one would lack even the necessities, was a measure which to this rich and opulent lord seemed a pious illusion, one of those fond aberrations of devotion more apt to excite hilarity than to be put into effect. Indeed, when the canon had first broached the matter to him, he had laughed heartily. Had he hoped by this to disconcert him and to deflate by his quips the perfervid imagination of his petitioner, led astray by too much devotion?

But when he saw that in carrying out this evangelical resolution John Baptist was prepared to put aside the strongest natural feelings and to prefer a poor priest to a beloved brother, he finally realized that there still are in the Church some of those "new men" whom the Holy Spirit formed on Pentecost to build up the infant Church--men who seek their treasure in poverty--and that De La Salle was one of them. Although he could not help showing his surprise, he surrendered the petitioner to the action of the Holy Spirit and gave him full liberty to follow the inspirations of God. That was all the pious canon had wanted; at last he felt himself truly happy when he saw himself free to become poor and abject and to die to the world by giving up his rank as a canon.

He left the archbishop's palace happier than he had entered it. On his return home he gathered all his disciples to share the good news with them. As he had desired, he had reached the summit of fortune on the Mount of Calvary, and his joy was so great that, to thank heaven for the favor it had given him, he and his companions sang the Te Deum.

Chapter XIV

De La Salle Maintains His Decision to Resign His Canonry in Favor of Father Faubert in Spite of the Renewed Appeals Made by His Relatives, Fellow Canons, and Friends.

The spiritual joys which the humble canon, now free to become poor and to lay aside his high rank, experienced on his departure from the archbishop's palace, was soon altered; he did not have much time to enjoy it. New opposition brought him renewed concern over this project which seemed compromised again just when he thought it was finally settled. The news of the resignation paper he had signed and which had won the archbishop's approval spread from house to house, from mouth to mouth, as rapidly as such tidings usually spread as a consequence of the various passions which agitate those who are curious about such things. It caused a great deal of uproar in the city and stirred up much dissatisfaction. One could hear nothing but murmuring, complaints and recriminations addressed to the pious source of all this agitation.

In order to stand by the heroic decision he had made, De La Salle on this occasion needed the fortitude inspired by the Holy Spirit, as did the early martyrs of the new law. There was still time for him to change his mind, to recover his canonry, or to bestow it on someone more acceptable to the Chapter than Father Faubert, someone with higher standing at the archbishop's, someone more favorably regarded by the public and his family.

What did they not do to make him come back on his decision! Pleas, exhortations, supplications, flattery, reproaches, threats, invectives--nothing was omitted. Each of his friends, relatives and fellow canons made his own personal attempt to bring him around. They all spoke for the younger brother, Louis, or at least for some other member of the family; and in case these would not accept, for some other distinguished friend who would honor the Chapter and join to the title of canon of the illustrious metropolitan church that of a son of Rheims and scion of one of its noble families.

If all did not agree on the candidates they suggested, they all made it clear that Father Faubert was the wrong man. The members of the Chapter did not consider him worthy to take his seat among them and to become one of their renowned company. The family considered it an act of injustice to let a canonical prebend slip from its grasp and go to a stranger. Whether this stranger was deserving or not did not concern the world in the least. In its eyes, and in the opinion of the family, he was not worthy to be a canon because he lacked wealth and gentle birth.

There ensued a general uprising in the city against the decision. To convince De La Salle to retract it, leading persons assured him that he could not do anything more pleasing to his archbishop, who had such a high regard for him and who had given in to his proposal only with misgivings and reluctance. His fellow canons, they said, expected that he would afford them this mark of deference for a Chapter which entertained a singular esteem for and attachment to

him, which considered him its glory and a man who spread abroad the good odor of Jesus Christ. It was represented to him that his best friends were asking for this favor in the name of all their fellow citizens; that this unanimous appeal from the entire city certainly sufficed to indicate where God's will lay; that if he doubted this it would be easy to convince him of it, since all of them were ready to sign the petition they presented to him.

Finally, he was told that he really should not offer such an affront to a family which had always loved him and which did not deserve that he should seem to disdain and despise it by seeking his successor outside its ranks. His family was large enough and religious enough to offer him many worthy candidates. It would certainly be disgraceful for the family and for himself if Father Faubert were preferred to his own brother or to one of his other close relatives, and if this stranger were to fill, in one of the most illustrious clerical bodies in all France, the position that he was vacating.

It was easy for him to avoid all these vexations by simply staying put; this was undoubtedly the best solution, the one that everybody preferred. They added that he would adopt it if he did not stubbornly wish to prove in his person that the most devout people are also the most hardheaded.

In the midst of all these objurgations De La Salle remained steadfast in a resolve which had already cost him such great sacrifices and which the Holy Spirit Himself had built up and established on the ruins of his self-love and at the expense of his natural preferences. Calm amidst all these murmurs, reproaches and complaints, he listened to his friends' appeals with quiet politeness, feeling that they ran counter to those of heaven. He smiled to himself when he heard people impute to self-love, to secret ambition, to refined pride, to stubbornness, a decision over which nature in him had so long battled against grace. To execute it he had begun by impressive sacrifices. More of the same lay in store for him every day he would live--more cruel renunciations which God alone would know about and of which De La Salle alone would be the victim.

A decision made according to God's will at the expense of flesh and blood admitted neither regret nor uncertainty. A proposal so obviously marked by the finger of God, inspired by so many invitations and inner movements of the Holy Spirit, arrived at after so much deliberation and consultation, and finally authorized by the highest superior, should certainly not be debated all over again. It was foolish for people to think that they could undermine or modify it. When his friends saw that their entreaties were useless and that De La Salle paid no attention to them, they let him alone and gave up their quest.

The final efforts came from the Chapter. That illustrious body was displeased at losing De La Salle even more than at seeing him replaced by Father Faubert. Its members did all they could to keep the one and exclude the other. With this in view, they wrote to the archbishop to inform him how unacceptable to them the nomination of Father Faubert was and how much it distressed them. They went on to give His Excellency to understand how ardently they desired to see the younger brother succeed the elder, thus excluding a man whose appointment they considered a disgrace for their whole company. The expedient which they suggested to the prelate to obtain their aim was short and easy.

As the formal announcement had not yet been made, it was a simple matter for the archbishop to delay it and then to use his authority over a man who respected it so highly in order to convince him either to keep his canonry or to confer it on someone else more acceptable to the Chapter, the family and the city. This is what they asked Archbishop Le Tellier to do. The latter, whose own opinion coincided fully with that of his Chapter, adopted the suggestion. Joining his pleas to those of De La Salle's fellow canons, he tried once more either to keep him in his place at the Cathedral or to persuade him to give his seat to his brother.

The archbishop felt that Father Callou, the vicar general and at this time superior of the major seminary of Rheims, was the man best qualified to handle this affair and to draw from a heart closed to all human motives the Christian submission which he owed to the desires of his archbishop. This new trial was a subtle one, for neither private interests nor feelings seemed to be involved. Apparently, the friends and family of John Baptist had not made their influence felt in the matter at all. Because the proposal was clothed in the trappings of the most venerable authority, it commanded respect. It attempted to make the Servant of God scrupulous about not giving in to the recommendations of his first superior, brought to him by the most influential cleric in the diocese, a man who enjoyed the highest reputation for virtue and sound doctrine.

What did the vicar general not do to carry out his mission according to the archbishop's desires and those of the Chapter, the family and the whole city! He omitted nothing to make the Servant of God feel the power that his oratorical talent gave him to influence men's hearts, a talent which, it seems, he possessed to a high degree. After reminding him of all that might move him and presenting under new aspects and with added emphasis the arguments which so many other lips had sought to advance, he canonized them in some manner and confirmed them by invoking the highest authority.

He told John Baptist that he had come on behalf of the archbishop to beg him to yield. He assured him that His Excellency's desire was to see him back in the Cathedral, or at least to see him bestow the canonry on his brother; that he could not, without causing his family a definite slight, hand over this dignity to another except his brother, who was by birth his closest relative and his heir; and that finally, since his brother was both capable and virtuous, it would be a slur on him if a stranger were preferred to him.

Although Father Callou tried his best to make the Holy Spirit speak through his lips, it was the man only who spoke, albeit very ably. The Holy Spirit said nothing to De La Salle, or rather uttered His message in the secret of his heart, confirming him in his resolve. His reply, short and to the point, brought out once more his detachment from flesh and blood and showed that he would not listen to human considerations. "If my brother were not my brother," he answered, "I would find no difficulty in choosing him to succeed me in order to satisfy the desires of the archbishop and in giving him the preference over the man I have named. But can I, and should I, yield to the voice of nature and to the solicitations which merely reecho it?"

Such an answer reduced the superior of the Rheims seminary to silence and dried up the source of his eloquence. Impressed, edified and convinced, he changed his mind and approved the decision he had come to challenge. After letting the man in him speak, he let the Holy Spirit pronounce His verdict and ended by applauding the heroic resolution he had been unable to modify.

"God forbid," he added, "that I should advise you to do what everybody wants you to do. Carry out what the Spirit of God has inspired you with. This advice, which is the contrary of what I came to tell you, is truly from Him and the only suggestion you must listen to." He ended by encouraging John Baptist to go ahead with his plan--another demonstration of the fact that the Holy Spirit puts His words into the mouth of whomsoever He pleases and causes even those tongues which were prepared to speak against His will to declare it.

Father Callou, better satisfied by seeing the Servant of God immovably fixed in his heroic attitude than if he had caused him to change it as the public wished, congratulated him on his firmness and reported to the archbishop that he had not succeeded in his mission. De La Salle also wrote the prelate and candidly repeated in his letter the reply he had made and mentioned the approval he had won from the superior of the seminary who had come hoping to get him to adopt a different course.

Seeing that there was no hope of prevailing and that time did not make John Baptist modify his position, the archbishop proceeded with the nomination of Father Faubert, who took possession of his canonry on August 16, 1683. De La Salle alone rejoiced over it. Having emerged triumphant from the great battle which God had given him the opportunity of waging so as to "see him win a great victory" (Wisdom), he was thus, at the age of thirty-three, relieved of a rich and honorable burden.

John Baptist experienced more satisfaction over his resignation than others feel over the occupation of such positions after having for a long time desired and avidly sought them. He still possessed his family fortune, but it would not take him long to give it up too, desirous as he was to make himself perfectly conformable to the One Who being infinitely rich made Himself poor for our sakes and eager to become in all things like unto His human brothers, exposed like them and with them to the necessities and cares of daily life with no other resource but Divine Providence.

Who can sufficiently admire the fortitude that the Spirit of God imparts to the souls which He has fully taken possession of and occupies completely? What the world abhors, what nature shrinks from the most becomes the object of their desires and of their holy longing. The privation of all things, the lack of necessities, a state which condemns them to pain, toil and abjection are what they aspire to. They consider their fortune made when they are poor and despised. They have all they long for in this world when, deprived of its goods and pleasures, they keep only its woes and sufferings as their lot. Their heritage is the dowry of the cross; they want no other.

Thanks be given to God Who even in our day still sends us some of these generous men who walk with courage in the footsteps of the Apostles on the path

trodden by the Man of Sorrows. Without having to go back to remote centuries, we find in our times followers of the Savior who possess the quintessence of His spirit, and who sigh after that which constitutes the world's and the flesh's greatest menace. In our century De La Salle has given us an example of these "new men," passionately attached to suffering, who seem to long for nothing except abjection, poverty and the crucifixion of the flesh.

It is true that when God speaks to hearts He uses language very different from that of men. The most admirable trait in De La Salle is that at the very time when he was doing such great things for God he was the only one who did not realize it. Deprived of his benefice, resolved to give away his wealth, ere long poorer than those with whom he was associated, with no other resource than the generosity of our heavenly Father, in danger of lacking even the necessities of life (which he indeed often had to do without), prepared to spend the rest of his life in a state of humiliation and suffering, he was convinced that he had done nothing for God as yet, had not even begun to work at the task of his sanctification. Hence, as we shall see, he set about it with unbelievable fervor.

The Servant of God, having relinquished his rank and assumed a station as low as his humility could wish for, found himself as free as the birds of the air to fly wherever the glory of God might require. His detachment from all worldly things and his perfect dedication to God's service were the two wings which lifted him above earth and bore him heavenward. They gave him the agility of pure spirits and a promptness equal to theirs which carried him wherever it might please God to summon him.

The first thought that occurred to him after resigning his canonry was to proceed to Paris. Father Philbert had advised him to do this. He had practically promised Father De La Barmondière to come. Father Barré also ardently desired to see him make this move. Each of these three virtuous persons, whose authority De La Salle greatly respected, had different reasons for wanting him to establish his work in Paris.

Father Philbert felt that this change of locale was necessary: to quiet the emotions, gossip and dissatisfaction stirred up in Rheims by the example of truly heroic virtue he had given; to mollify the De La Salle family, irritated over the manner of acting of a relative who had shown so little concern about its honor and its interests; to give the Chapter time to forget its displeasure at him and its prejudice against the new canon; and, finally, to allow the city to recover from the shock and gossip provoked by actions whose perfections it could not understand and against which everyone had taken umbrage, depending on his own interests or the various passions which possessed him.

Father De La Barmondière wished to see De La Salle come to Paris mainly for the good of his parish. He envied the city of Rheims this treasure it possessed without realizing it.

Father Barré looked at the matter with a wider vision. He wanted to see the Servant of God in Paris only in order to withdraw this burning torch from Rheims where it remained as though hidden under a basket, to manifest it in the capital

as though on the summit of a mountain so that it might shine over the entire kingdom and shed rays of light everywhere.

All these arguments were powerful ones, and De La Salle was duly impressed by them. It was indeed time for him to withdraw from the sight of his fellow citizens. Some were indisposed in his regard; others were dissatisfied with his conduct. They bore in their hearts wounds which only his absence would gradually heal. In time they would pardon him for faults which heaven rewards with great merit.

On the other hand, there are always some among the crowd of the dissatisfied who get over their prejudices and are honest enough to admit their mistakes, their lack of faith and want of virtue. In the future these people would learn to recognize virtue in one who gave them such extraordinary proofs thereof. Later on De La Salle would actually have more to fear from their approbation and praise than from their blame and censure. It would be more prudent to avoid, through a discreet withdrawal, this peril, more dangerous for his virtue than the most violent persecutions.

Among the mass of ordinary Christians there are always some who entertain aspirations toward the perfect life and try to attain it, and others who at least understand and esteem it. De La Salle, although blamed and condemned by the greater number, still had his admirers and his panegyrists who willingly paid the tribute of praise that his sacrifices deserved. Such admiration is always a snare for truly virtuous persons. The humble ex-canon, now only a simple priest, was afraid of such attitudes. For this reason he wanted to bury himself in Paris where he would be protected from such a subtle temptation.

As a man of his word he wanted to keep the promise he had made to the saintly pastor of Saint Sulpice--to take a few of his disciples with him and open one of his new kind of schools in that parish which was almost as large as a diocese. Finally, he was as anxious to satisfy the zeal of Father Barré as he was to give fuller scope to his own by going to the capital from which it would be easier to extend the benefits of his work throughout the kingdom. He felt that his canonry had been a sort of chain binding him and that Rheims was like a prison where he remained confined; that he needed to get away from the city just as he had gotten out of the Chapter, if he wanted to be truly free. There was thus no lack of reasons that called him to Paris, that even made it a duty for him to go there.

Will he heed the call? Will he do so as soon as his zeal would like? No. He is a man of obedience; he will not move until it sends him. All these arguments in favor of going were weighty. All the people who invoked them enjoyed great authority over his mind, but obedience held even more sway over his heart. He goes when it tells him to go; he comes when it tells him to come; he does what it orders when it says to him, "Do this." If his director's consent did not accompany all these reasons for acting, the latter would lose all influence over him.

De La Salle held Father Philbert to be a prudent counselor; the arguments he put forward seemed well-founded and decisive. He considered Father De La Barmondière and Father Barré as two saintly men, two of the greatest servants of

God to be found in Paris. By the light of faith, however, he looked upon his director as Jesus Christ Himself, as the organ and oracle of His desires. In this persuasion he conformed to his director's views and obeyed him with child-like docility.

He often consulted enlightened persons, eminent for their virtue, but he did not adopt their advice except when his director approved it. In all things he abided by the latter's advice, preferring it not only to his own opinions but even to the views of persons of the most outstanding holiness. He was persuaded that when a diversity of judgments arose he had to follow that of his visible angel. When the latter spoke, he forgot everything the others said. This was the only way to remain in peace and to be sure of following God's will.

If one cannot have blind confidence in one's director, one should leave him; but when after prayer one has made a judicious choice of a director; when, freed from natural inclinations and worldly prejudices and the tendencies of one's own heart, one has found a director whose lively, pure faith seeks nothing but Jesus Christ and listens only to Him, one must feel certain that one will hear God's voice from his mouth and must take his advice as one's rule of life. De La Salle gives us a marvelous example of such docility.

He would have preferred to leave Rheims and move to Paris; the advice of Father Philbert authorized him to do so. He had pledged his word to Father De La Barmondière; the wishes of Father Barré drew him thither. He told all this to his director with the simplicity and candor of a novice. After opening his heart fully, he asked for advice. What would he do if the advice happened to run counter to that of the other great servants of God and to his own personal preferences? He would obey the one who takes the place of Jesus Christ. To him he must sacrifice his own wishes and the wise counsels given to him. That was what he did.

His director's opinion ran counter to the opinions of Fathers Philbert, De La Barmondière, and Barré. His was the option which John Baptist followed, and rightly so. If we consider his director's reasons and compare them with those given above, we shall see that the latter's position was indeed to be preferred.

"Your new Institute," he said to De La Salle, "is just starting; it is still in gestation. It may be that it will not survive the move to Paris to be born there. Nature itself requires that it should develop in the place where it was conceived before appearing in the light of day. One must give a plant time to draw nourishment from its native soil, to grow strong and to strike deep roots before thinking of transplanting it, even to a more favorable location. If it is moved too soon, it dies. Your new Community is like a tender seedling which has barely sprung up in the soil of Rheims. Before moving it to Paris, give it time to assume consistency, to develop sufficiently in the place where it was born.

"If you want another comparison, consider this. When one wishes to erect a building, one must dig deep to lay the foundation. As the edifice rises it needs

a skillful hand to control its progress. Your new Community is this spiritual structure which requires your presence. You are its architect, its founder. If you go off to Paris to start building all over again on new foundations, you will simply ruin what you have established in Rheims. It would take a miracle to prevent it from falling to pieces.

"You are perfectly right to call your little group a 'tiny flock,'" he added. "You have about fifteen men here, in Laon, in Guise, and in Reims. If you take a few of them with you to Paris, you will divide and weaken the group. You will abandon to the wiles of the infernal wolf those whom you leave behind. For when you divide your men, some of them will be away from you. You cannot at the same time be in Paris and in Rheims. When taking care of some, you will be neglecting others.

"Just as your presence will do them much good wherever you are, so too your absence will not fail to cause harm whenever you are absent. Disciples who are still novices in virtue absolutely need their master to teach them. Travelers just entering upon the ways of spirituality need a guide to show them the path. The ones whom you leave to themselves, no longer having you with them, will quickly fall away from the principles you have taught them and will lose their way on a road where it is so easy to be misled."

Last of all, his director made him realize how necessary his presence still was in Rheims by representing to him the harm that going to Paris then would do to his little Community which was still only half-organized. He reminded him of the disappointments and worries he had had to endure in order to bring it to the point where it now was, and led him to admit that the schoolmasters still needed his care and watchfulness. As for the promise he had made to the pastor of Saint Sulpice to establish a school in his parish, the director praised John Baptist's zealous desire to keep his word.

"However," he observed, "such a promise binds you only if it is reasonable, possible, and advantageous to your Institute. So long as these conditions remain unfulfilled, your word cannot oblige you. You must make sure that in fulfilling it you do not destroy what you have started in Rheims by trying to establish yourself in Paris." Such reasons were too cogent to be denied. It was not, however, their cogency that made De La Salle remain in Rheims but his spirit of obedience. That was all he paid attention to. His conduct was ruled by nothing else because he wished his management of the affairs of his Institute to be based on nothing else.

This verdict of his director, which De La Salle did not allow himself to call into question, put an end to his reflections and inner debate. He wrote to Father De La Barmondière explaining that it was impossible for him to carry out his promise at that time and begging him to be patient until Providence indicated that the right time had come, since It knows how to make everything contribute to the fulfillment of Its designs. He also wrote to Father L'Espagnol, who had charge of the parish schools at Saint Sulpice, saying that he had been advised not to leave Rheims and that it was not possible for him to go to Paris yet.

When Father Barré heard this news, he was greatly disappointed, for nobody more than he longed to see De La Salle establish one of his Christian schools in Paris. He felt sure that from there they would not fail to spread all over the kingdom. This hope was what preoccupied the pious Minim exclusively and what gave constant exercise to his zeal.

As a pioneer founder of Christian and gratuitous schools, he had at first planned to establish them for both boys and girls; but since his efforts in setting up schools for boys had not met with success, he had directed his energies entirely toward multiplying those for girls. He had done so all the more earnestly since mothers are the natural teachers of their children, and hence it was extremely important to give them the instruction they needed by a truly pious education. In this way they would be able to educate their children and bring them up in a Christian manner.

No doubt this obligation applied to fathers also; but they usually pay scant attention to it, whether because as a rule they have less religious spirit and less inclination toward piety, or whether because they spend their time working and return home exhausted. They are also less often at home, as they go out to find some type of relaxation. Father Barré had not given up the idea of schools for boys, however; he had only put it off, awaiting the favorable moment appointed by Divine Providence and hoping to attempt it again. He even convinced himself that the success he had achieved in his establishments for girls would eventually come to him in those for boys, when God's good time came. As he was growing old, he also feared with reason that death might cut short his expectations.

Thus, when he saw De La Salle laboring with so much zeal at the same task and carrying it out like a truly apostolic man, giving up all things and practicing the most heroic virtue, he honored him as the man chosen by God for this task and did all he could to encourage him to come to Paris. In the Minim's opinion, Rheims could not serve as the cradle of an Institute destined for universal diffusion. Paris was the only proper place for it, the only center which would permit it to attain real progress.

When he lost hope of seeing John Baptist move to Paris, Father Barré was inconsolable and made no secret of his disappointment to all those who like him awaited such a great blessing. There is no doubt that the impression made on De La Salle's mind and heart by Father Barré, that his authority and the cogency of his arguments, the renown of his sanctity, the depth of his insight concerning a task for which he had received the first inspiration and the first grace for executing it, would have convinced De La Salle to go to Paris if obedience to his director had not kept him in Rheims.

Chapter XV

With the Approval of His Director, De La Salle Sells All His Family Property and Distributes the Proceeds to the Poor.

On the advice of his director, De La Salle remained in his native city and gave himself wholeheartedly to the work of which he now had full charge. True, its success, its progress and its perfection were in God's hands, and he was nothing but the instrument; but God wants instruments fit for His hands: men who are dead to themselves, who renounce their own views and live only according to His, who act only as He gives them to act. John Baptist sought to achieve this state of perfect death to self; he tried in every way to become truly God's man, capable of doing His work. To his own sanctification and that of his disciples, he directed his undivided application; he desired these goals to the exclusion of all else.

But to walk with giant strides in the path of perfection one must not be attached to anything; one must be detached from everything and filled with manly courage to follow Christ. This was what the holy priest still had to do and what he was about to undertake with heroic generosity. He had broken the ties that held him back: his canonry no longer forced him to divide his time between the choir and his Community; his resignation had excluded him from worldly society by making him objectionable to the world and the world objectionable to him. Even so, he did not yet enjoy full liberty.

If he no longer possessed an ecclesiastical benefice, he still owned his family property. He felt that he possessed too much and that at last the time had come to get rid of the excess. As we mentioned previously, he had made up his mind about this action sometime before. The motives which led him to his decision were those given above. The counsel of Jesus Christ, Who said, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell all you have, give it to the poor, and then come and follow Me," was his first and principal reason. Because he wanted to be perfect, his desire made it necessary for him to become actually poor.

In fact, renunciation is the first step leading to perfection. If anyone wishes to follow Christ, he must run after Him; but to run one must carry no heavy burden, nothing to impede or weigh him down. The slightest excess would retard and eventually stop him. Since the burden of wealth is a grievous one, it is necessary to despoil oneself of it in order to reach Jesus Christ. He Himself goes on before us naked, stripped of all; in His company only the poor are found; with them a rich man could not associate.

The connection between poverty and perfection is so basic that Jesus Christ makes the one depend on the other. "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell what you have, give it to the poor," and when you have done that "then come and follow Me." He says that this selling and this giving away must precede our coming and following Him. Voluntary poverty, which gives one wings to follow Christ,

strongly attracted De La Salle. Drawn by its beauty, he wanted poverty for his spouse, being assured that the treasures of grace and all spiritual goods are the rich dowry that it brings to those who embrace it for the love of God.

This first consideration had to do with his own perfection; the second referred to the Brothers. The desire for perfection could not take root in their hearts so long as solicitude for the present and anxiety for the future preoccupied them. This temptation affected all of them. It incited them to leave a house which offered no assurance for the future in order to go and seek it elsewhere--in vain, most of the time, and often enough at the risk of compromising their salvation. Their faith was not sufficiently strong to persuade them that abandonment to Divine Providence is a sure source of support, and that there are no contracts, no deeds, no property rights that can so certainly be counted on.

Their charity was not yet perfect enough to make them realize, through daily experience, that confidence in God is the key that unlocks all heaven's treasures. If the lessons given them on this subject by their father had still not convinced them, it was because his own conduct had not yet lent conviction to his words. He needed, therefore, to give them in his person such an example so as to confirm them in their vocation and inspire them with a yearning for perfection.

Finally, his entire work was a work of Providence. Father Barré had wished to found his schools only on this infinitely solid foundation and to address himself only to souls who walked by pure faith. He had not even wanted to give his foundation any other name.*

The saintly Minim had inspired De La Salle with the same attitude and had begged him not to seek, for himself or for his disciples, any other reliance but the arm of our heavenly Father. Grace made John Baptist realize that when his disciples saw him, by choice, as poor as they were through necessity, they would no longer hesitate to throw themselves, like him, upon the bosom of Providence. In a word, De La Salle wanted to be like his Brothers. After the example of Christ he wished to become poor with the poor, so as to make them love their condition as poor men.

These three considerations urged him, therefore, to divest himself of his family fortune. As he did nothing except on the advice of his director, he mentioned this matter to him. After explaining the reasons that had led him to this determination, he besought him to give him the further merit of obedience in executing it. Here was another embarrassing decision for the director, another step for which people would blame him and for which the world would criticize him. De La Salle had already done so many unconventional things, however, that by this time people should have lost the habit of wondering over his conduct. Anything could be expected from a man of his character. The world itself,

*He called the congregation he founded "Sisters of Providence."

tired of censuring him, was somewhat prepared not to find anything more to criticize in what he did.

Perhaps the director realized that his spiritual son was truly a man of grace and acted only by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit so that resisting his plans was really contradicting God's purposes. Perhaps he considered his disciple as a man inspired by heaven, one who could not be governed by the same principles as ordinary pious souls. Perhaps he himself was secretly inspired to approve a desire which was obviously most supernatural. Perhaps, finally, he himself was persuaded by the motives that actuated his penitent and agreed that he needed to join action to words, making himself like the schoolmasters and giving up all he possessed, in order to help them become perfect men.

Whatever the reasons which persuaded the director to consent to De La Salle's request, he did consent; and although this last step De La Salle took was by far the most unusual, heroic and unworldly action he ever performed, capable of bringing down on his director more criticism than the resignation of this canonry, it seemed to the latter that he should consent to it more readily than he had to the former renunciation.

The fact is, this new decision presented many more difficulties than the former one. Such things simply were not done any more; and at best it was not easy to carry it out, for opposition from one's family usually prevents such projects from being executed. Why then did the world, usually so prone to protest against any extraordinary manifestation of religious spirit and which never approves heroic deeds of piety, raise less of an outcry when, under the eyes of his whole family and of the entire city, De La Salle sold his possessions and distributed the proceeds to the poor than when he resigned his canonry? Why did his family not object strenuously when it saw itself being despoiled of goods which its members rightfully could have expected to inherit? Why did they not try to stop him when to their detriment he was giving away his entire patrimony to the needy?

I find this very surprising, and indeed it is remarkable. For after all, since Church benefices do not belong to anyone as his personal possession and should not be handed down as legacies, why was there so much grumbling when De La Salle named as his successor someone who he felt was the best man qualified, even if he was not a relative? And why did the family not remonstrate when he sold his property and gave the money to the poor, thereby causing his relatives a sort of wrong?

One can only reflect that the world's complaints are as unjust as its judgments are illogical. Perhaps there was as much criticism of this second deed of De La Salle as of the first, but we do not know about it for the memoirs do not mention it.

Perhaps also the fact that De La Salle distributed his wealth to the starving during a time of general calamity made it appear as a striking act of charity, something so edifying and so public-spirited that the most pitiless censors of his conduct found themselves reduced to silence, and that his relatives, equally ret-

icent under the circumstances, kept quiet for fear of appearing too grasping at a time when widespread starvation would have made such complaints seem utterly disgraceful. They might have provoked violence if they had attempted to interfere with the generosity of a man who so opportunely came forward to succor the starving poor and tried to keep them alive at a time when famine threatened their existence.

It is a fact that De La Salle had resolved to divest himself of his fortune without deciding exactly what he would use it for. He really had only two alternatives: either to give his money away entirely to any and all poor people who came along, or to dedicate it to the benefit of those he was especially in charge of. These two possibilities presented themselves to his mind, backed by reasons of almost equal weight, so that at first he did not see clearly which option he should choose.

On the one hand, the schoolmasters were certainly poor; they were the first needy people that Providence had sent to him, and they certainly deserved the preference since they dedicated their lives to the instruction of the poor. What more natural than to secure for them a decent living and adequate subsistence? Did not the right order of charity demand that he provide for the material needs of those who were so necessary for the spiritual advantage of so many poor children? Since nature itself suggests to parents to leave their goods to their children (and civil law itself obliges them to do so), it was only natural for De La Salle, now that he was a father, to pass on to those whom God had given him as his spiritual children the fortune of which he wished to deprive himself.

Furthermore, his work needed support. When urgent necessities arose, it would require extraordinary assistance. Where would such help come from if some public calamity occurred? The world, which opposed him and which felt only scorn for his followers, was hardly disposed to help them. Nor could he expect to find in the homes of his relatives the help which was lacking in his own house. He had done too much to antagonize them. In a sense he had deprived them of their expectations. He could never hope to attract their attention to his troubles, still less to touch their hearts over the hardships of the state into which he had hurled himself in spite of them.

The remedy for all these difficulties was in his hands. All he had to do was to use as an endowment for his work the wealth from which he sought to detach himself out of a desire for greater perfection.

Nothing could have been more appropriate. The schools, still in their infancy, would have been more solidly established. The schoolmasters, eager for some kind of security, would have found it in this donation made in their favor. Their uneasiness would have been allayed and their vocation rendered more solid. Since their condition of life and that of De La Salle had been exchanged, now that he had divested himself of his wealth in their favor, they would have opened their minds to the lessons of perfection he gave them. They would have at last found in his person a striking model of perfect disinterestedness and abandonment to Divine Providence. This solution had the approval of several persons distinguished by their piety and was recommended by the example of Canon Roland.

"Since you have made up your mind," they told John Baptist, "to divest yourself of your wealth, do it in favor of your Community. Piety and a sort of equity seem to make this a duty for you. Nobody can find fault with such a determination. Your work is still just beginning; it needs your money as much as it needs you direction, if it is to subsist. As a father you have a duty to provide for your children's subsistence and to give them the preference over strangers. Wisdom dictates this, and your kindheartedness can only agree. The worldly-wise, who might be inclined to criticize you for laying aside your wealth, will have to admit your wisdom in using it to consolidate your good works. The example of Canon Roland, whose advice you sought while he yet lived and whose memory you continue to venerate, should guide you in this. He endowed his schools for girls. Why not do the same for yours?"

Apparently, this attitude had much to commend it. If De La Salle adopted it, he would lay to rest the concerns of the schoolmasters and would preserve his little flock from all disquiet about the future.

The ideal of total abandonment to Providence, however, had remained deeply embedded in his mind ever since Father Barré had taught him such sublime lessons on this subject. He hesitated to do anything which might give the lie to his own deepest sentiments on this score. To him it seemed more perfect to cast all his cares, whether for himself or for his men, into the heart of our heavenly Father, and together with them to plunge into the abyss of His Providence which never abandons any but those who fail to honor It by perfect trust.

The saintly Minim's maxim ran thus: "Schools that are founded (endowed) will founder"*; and he added that since there is nothing in this world more reliable than Providence, nothing could afford the schools a more stable foundation than to establish them on Providence. A very exalted maxim, certainly, and for that reason not commonly accepted. The fact that it was so out of the ordinary might have made it appear questionable in practice, for that which is the most perfect in theory is often open to resounding failure and dangerous illusions and is not always the surest course to follow in practice.

Circumspect as he was, De La Salle feared yielding to illusions of his own devising and choosing the less traveled road under the pretext of higher perfection. All these considerations disturbed his mind so that he was not sure which alternative he should adopt. In his uncertainty he sought at the feet of Jesus Christ the solution for his doubts. To allow full entry to the divine light, he felt that the best way was to set aside all personal preferences and to try to place himself in a state of total indifference to everything. Nothing else prepares the heart better to recognize and to carry out the will of God.

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*The pun is lost in translation: fonder = to establish or endow;
fondre - to melt away, to founder.

So he began by offering himself to God's good pleasure and by abandoning himself wholly and without reserve to Him. After this he ventured to explain his quandary to His Divine Majesty in terms something like these: "My God, I do not know whether I should endow the schools or not. It is not up to me to establish communities; I do not even know how they should be established. You alone know this, and it is for You to do it in whatever way You please. I do not dare to establish or endow because I do not know what You want. So I will not contribute in any way to endowing the schools; if You endow the schools, they will be well endowed; if You do not they will be without endowment. I beseech You to make Your holy will known to me."

It does not seem that this prayer uttered in such total sincerity was followed by any special enlightenment or that an instant revelation of God's will disclosed to him just what he was supposed to do. But at least it was followed by a state of perfect resignation to God. The Servant of God, at rest and immovable in the bosom of Providence, remained calm and unruffled in the future even though he was often enough obliged to endure the most crucifying trials and to do without the necessities of life.

Eventually God, Whose action His servant observed carefully, brought about the right opportunity for him to carry out in the sight of his family and of the entire city the donation and distribution of his goods in such circumstances that none of his relatives tried to stop him and nobody dared to criticize him. As we have said, he had first of all secured his director's approval for this act. At first, the latter was surprised by such a heroic decision and had raised some objections in order to prevent its being carried out. But at last he had agreed when he saw his disciple's humble dispositions with regard to himself and the great docility with which he submitted the project to him.

This docility was indeed striking and sufficed to persuade De La Salle's spiritual guide that Someone even more skillful than himself was leading him in secret and that the Holy Spirit Himself guided his conduct. Although convinced that his plan was inspired by heaven, John Baptist did not dream of carrying it out save when obedience would allow him to do so. Here is a fact which illustrates his attitude.

After discussing with his director the resolution he had taken of divesting himself of his wealth and asking for his approval, he added, "I will not do it if you do not want me to; I will do it in whatever measure you desire; if you tell me to keep something, even only five sous, I will keep them."

What language from a man of such high merit, a man whose heroic sacrifices had already begun to shed luster on his name! Would a well-brought-up child speak to his parents with more submissiveness? Such language indeed characterizes the fortunate children to whom the Kingdom of Heaven belongs, those whom we must come to resemble if we wish to enter it. It is the language of faith, of humility, and of obedience. It flows as from its source when it issues from the mouth of a man who sees all through the eyes of faith and recognizes Jesus Christ alone in his director; a man who by reason of a basic distrust of self seeks in his di-

rector the knowledge of God's will, and who, bringing to him a heart indifferent to all and disposed to carry out his orders, receives them with joy and obeys them blindly.

As a rule such grace-favored souls consult their directors with such saintly dispositions that they bring them the light of the Holy Spirit Who dwells within them, the Spirit Who communicates Himself to the director and inspires him with the right answer. It happens often enough that when such souls approach their director, he suddenly finds himself of a different opinion without understanding why or how. Moreover, the signs which prove that the Spirit of God speaks to these holy souls are unmistakable: perfect docility, deep humility and the total submission of mind and heart with which they approach their spiritual guides. These characterize the requests they make of him, show that they are moved by the Holy Spirit, and constitute irrefragable credentials to authenticate these heavenly inspirations.

What I am saying here was fully verified in the example I am relating. At first De La Salle's director was not going to give his approval to the desire that the latter came to lay before him. The proposal he presented to sell his property and give the proceeds to the poor in a city where the principal officials and the leading citizens were his relatives was even less acceptable than that of resigning his canonry. Still, the director, who had not agreed to the latter step except after long and repeated entreaties, consented to the former with little hesitation. How did this happen? No doubt, the Holy Spirit inspired the director while He placed the right words on the lips of De La Salle. The proof of the speaker's true inspiration lay in the humility, docility, and submissiveness with which he spoke.

In fact, John Baptist had hardly finished when his director felt himself completely convinced. To put his own conscience at rest he gave his penitent permission to donate and to distribute his wealth to the poor while leaving to him the risk of facing up to whatever might happen and to what people might say. Fortunately for both of them, the circumstances of the moment were favorable to this heroic deed and afforded the public an opportunity to express its admiration for it.

The year 1684 had brought with it great distress. Champagne felt the effects of a long famine which had afflicted nearly the entire kingdom. The poor from the countryside had come into the capital, hoping to find alms. Joining forces with those native to the city, they turned Rheims into a vast almshouse. The majority of the population had resorted to begging because both agricultural and manufacturing enterprises had had to shut down on account of the severity of the winter and the exorbitant prices of everything. People up to then self-supporting went about shamefacedly begging for bread from the wealthy, while the "professional poor" begged brazenly.

The famine was so widespread and so cruel that many well-to-do people could not make ends meet and ended in the ranks of the beggars, without anything to eat, but still not daring to beg. The cost of living was such that very soon people

exhausted the savings accumulated during past years. Those who were not rich to begin with soon found themselves a prey to hunger and destitution. Religious communities, too, including some that were wealthy and richly endowed, did not escape the common hardships and were obliged to borrow money or sell property in order to provide for their needs.

The year of such great misfortune was also the year that provided De La Salle with extraordinary merit and afforded him opportunities for practicing outstanding virtue. It led him to exercise the most notable works of spiritual and corporal mercy in the city where he had been so shamefully ill-used. Thus he experienced the pleasure that saints find so delightful: that of feeding several of his enemies and of taking his revenge on calumnious tongues by heroically charitable actions. He finally realized what his wealth was really worth when he was free to distribute it all to the poor. It is hard to tell which was sweeter to him: to have become poor himself or to be rich enough to be able to relieve the destitute. He gained the double merit of helping the needy while becoming one of them.

However, he did not distribute his funds haphazardly nor in a precipitous manner. As a man who did everything in a well-regulated way, he succeeded in introducing strict order into his charity. He made his funds last as long as the famine did and extended them to the cases of real need. To avoid making any mistakes and to respect a sort of equity even in the practice of charity, he determined that there were three classes of needy people whom he proposed to help.

The first group were the children in the schools. After their lessons were over, each one was given a portion of bread which most of them received more eagerly than they did instruction. The second group was composed of the poor who were ashamed to beg. To find them he had to search them out, for they usually dissimulated their distress and, through misplaced pride, preferred to starve rather than to come forward and ask for help. The charitable priest did all he could to find such persons, while keeping himself in the background, trying to assist them and at the same time to hide from them the kindly hand that brought them succor while respecting their feelings. When he could not remain unknown, what did he not do and say to spare their embarrassment by the signs of compassion and tenderness which accompanied his liberality?

The third group of needy people were those who gathered at his house. There he himself, or in his absence one of the pious ecclesiastics who lived with him, gave some simple instructions to these persons who, as a rule, need food for their souls even more than for their bodies, and who generally show their interest in the former only through hope of receiving the latter.

Seeing so many poverty-stricken persons of all kinds gathered together, the generous priest reflected on their spiritual needs in order to give them appropriate advice. By his pious remonstrances, his prudent reproofs and marks of the tenderest compassion, he sought, before ministering to their material wants, to heal the maladies of their souls, which most of them were unconcerned about, since they did not realize that they existed.

This distribution of food at the house took place every morning. De La Salle came to take charge of this right after he said Mass. He displayed such lively and obvious signs of faith and devotion that these dispositions were shared by those who beheld him. Jesus Christ became visible to him in the person of His suffering members. John Baptist knelt at their feet and offered them his alms with the signs of respect and joy which he would have exhibited if he had beheld and given help to Jesus Christ Himself. He did even more. When he had become poor in his turn, through assisting the poor, he took his share of the bread that was being distributed to them, as being one of them. He ate it kneeling in their midst, with a satisfaction and joy which showed the pleasure he experienced in the practice of poverty joined with that of charity.

He carried this practice even further. Avidly seeking the merit of the most humiliating poverty, he wished to experience the shame of begging, and the confusion of eating the bread for which he had begged from door to door. Humility, and also necessity in the end, made this an obligation for him. Having given away all he had and become even poorer than those whom he had fed, he in his turn, sacrificing his self-love, went from house to house, asking for alms. After several refusals, he received from a good woman a loaf of black bread which out of respect he ate kneeling and with a joy impossible to describe.

Soon after this incident he left on foot for Rethel to discuss with the Duke of Mazarin the proposed founding of a seminary for schoolmasters for the villages of the Duke's domains. When the two of them came back to Rheims to confer on this matter with the archbishop and to ask for his approval, Archbishop Le Tellier rewarded the charity of the one and satisfied the humility of the other by telling them that they were a pair of idiots. "Pardon me, Your Excellency," replied the humble priest, "there is really only one," meaning that this epithet belonged to him alone and that the Duke did not deserve it.

De La Salle had all the time he needed to exhaust all his resources, which amounted to some 40,000 livres, during the famine which lasted two years. A wealthy man when it began, he was poor when it ended. At last he saw himself in the state where he had longed to be. Happy to possess God and nothing but God, he could say with Saint Francis, that great lover of poverty, "My God and my All! If I have lost all for His sake, I find it all again in Him. He alone suffices." He did in fact find again all he had given up in Him Who is the source of all good. Divine Providence, to which he had abandoned all his interests and those of his little flock, always remembered him and his. They never lacked necessities, whereas these were lacking to a great many unfortunate people. Even the rich had a hard time insuring themselves against the consequences of this terrible famine.

Those who witnessed the pious generosity of the charitable priest were astounded and could hardly credit what they beheld with their own eyes, namely that there should still be a man on this earth ready to give away everything without keeping anything for himself, a man who showed no anxiety for himself and his own, a man who without thinking of the morrow left all concern about it to God, doing so at a time when day after day the famine occasioned cruel apprehension to most people about what tomorrow would bring.

Here was a man who forgot himself in circumstances when everybody else was thinking only of himself and forgetting everyone else, a man whose only concern was to feed and relieve the poor and to become poor himself at the time when there seemed to be scarcely a step between poverty and death. Here was a man whom his fellow citizens could not praise and admire sufficiently, the same one whom they had buried under their criticism and sarcasm. His own followers, who could observe him more narrowly and witness his total charity, could not help expressing their surprise to him.

Although two years of famine had gone by and although a large number of other people had lacked the necessities of life, his Community had always been provided for by the hand of their heavenly Father. Still, they were not without concern for the morrow. The state of poverty and of abandonment to Divine Providence that their father had embraced and to which they had in some measure constrained him by their reply to his instructions on this point, became, it seems, a fresh reason for inquiet on their part. From a man who had given away all he had, they could no longer expect the same assistance in times of need that they would have found when he possessed a rich canonry and his family fortune.

But that was the state in which the man of God awaited them. The moment was a favorable one for him to open their eyes and make them acknowledge the care Divine Providence had taken of them and to begin again his lessons on trust and abandonment to Him which they had obliged him to interrupt until he made himself as poor as they.

De La Salle, therefore, seized the favorable opportunity presented to him to make them realize how well God had taken care of them personally and had supplied all their needs, and to assure them, judging the future by the past, that they would never be in need of anything so long as they were faithful in serving God and in trying to please Him.

"Do not forget, my dear Brothers," he told them, "the sad times we have just come through. You have seen with your own eyes all the calamities that famine brings down upon the poor and all the ravages it can occasion to the fortunes of the rich. This whole city was like one vast hospice where the poor in their destitution gathered and spent the last days of a life which hunger would soon close. During all this time, when the wealthiest were not always sure of finding, at whatever price, bread which had become as rare as it was expensive, what did you lack? Thanks be to God, although we have had neither money nor income, during these two terrible years, we have lacked nothing. We owe no one anything in any of our houses, while some of our well-established neighbors have been ruined despite their resources since they have been obliged to sell their property and to borrow to keep alive."

By thus making the miracles wrought by Divine Providence in their favor palpable to them, he finally taught them to abandon themselves to Its care. After this the devil no longer succeeded in penetrating their Community and in sowing among them these doubts and misgivings so insulting to the goodness of God, Who, when He bestowed life on His creatures, assumed the task of supplying their needs.

It was on this unshakable foundation that De La Salle began erecting his life work. More firmly convinced than ever that voluntary poverty is an insurance policy for all the necessities of life, he wanted no other sort of contract than the one that Jesus Christ offers us in the Gospel. On this point he carried perfection to such a degree that he refused considerable sums which various persons offered him in view of endowing the houses of the Brothers. "Our Brothers," he said, "will survive so long as they are poor. They will lose the spirit of their vocation as soon as they start procuring for themselves the unnecessary commodities of life."

What we have thus far related about De La Salle's life includes his childhood, his education, his entry into the clerical state, and his priestly ministry. By following him through the years we have shown him as an example of innocence for children, of docility for students, of piety for young clerics, of regularity and fervor for canons, of zeal and religious spirit for priests. Now we shall see in him a model of the greatest perfection as he goes about organizing his Institute.

END OF BOOK ONE

APPROVAL

At the behest of the honorable Keeper of the Seals, I have read this first volume of the Life of John Baptist de La Salle, Priest, Doctor, Canon of the Cathedral of Rheims, and Founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. The reading of this history can only be most edifying for the faithful and capable of inspiring in the Brothers of the Christian Schools all the religious sentiments of their holy Founder. It contains nothing contrary to good morals and to the Faith of the Catholic, Apostolic and Roman Church. At the Sorbonne, November 18, 1732.

Signed: DE MARCILLY

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