# The Life of John Baptist de La Salle, Founder of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools

A Biography in Three Books

Book One

Frontispiece from the 1733 edition of Blain's *Life*, an engraving by Jean-Baptiste Scotin of a painting by Pierre Léger which is now lost. (Émile Rousset, *J. B. de La Salle; Iconographie*, Boulogne: Limet, 1979, plate 9.)

# The Life of John Baptist de La Salle, Founder of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools

## A Biography in Three Books

Book One

Jean-Baptiste Blain
Translated by Richard Arnandez, FSC
Edited by Luke Salm, FSC

Lasallian Publications
Christian Brothers Conference
Landover, Maryland

## Lasallian Publications

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*The Life of John Baptist de La Salle, Founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools; A Biography in Three Books*
is a translation of books one, two, and three of
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The editor is pleased
to dedicate this revised translation
to Augustine Loes, FSC,
in gratitude for
a life-long association,
crowned in the Buttimer Institute
and Lasallian Publications
by a collaborative search
for the mind and heart of
John Baptist de La Salle

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*John Baptist de La Salle: Two Early Biographies*. Dom François-Élie Maillefer, OSB, and Brother Bernard, FSC. Original translations by William J. Quinn, FSC; revised translations with notes by Donald C. Mouton, FSC. Edited by Paul Grass, FSC. Volume 1 (1996) of Lasallian Resources: Biographies of John Baptist de La Salle by His Contemporaries.

*The Life of John Baptist de La Salle, Founder of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools; A Biography in Three Books*. Jean-Baptiste Blain. Translated by Richard Arnandez, FSC. Edited by Luke Salm, FSC. Volume 2 (2000) of Lasallian Resources: Biographies of John Baptist de La Salle by His Contemporaries. Book One, Book Two, and Book Three of the original work by Blain are published in separate bindings but with continuous pagination.

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*John Baptist de La Salle: The Message of His Catechism*. Jean Pungier, FSC. Translated by Oswald Murdoch, FSC. Edited by Gerard Rummery, FSC. Volume 4 (1999) of Lasallian Resources: Current Lasallian Studies.

*Sacred Scripture in the Spirituality of Saint John Baptist de La Salle*. Luis Varela Martínez, FSC. Translated by Francis Vesel, FSC. Edited by Donald C. Mouton, FSC. Volume 5 (2000) of Lasallian Resources: Current Lasallian Studies.

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# FOREWORD

Almost immediately after the death of John Baptist de La Salle in 1719, the superiors of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, with a view to a biography, began to collect documents, including some in the Founder's own hand, and testimonies from the Brothers and those who knew him. Brother Timothée, the second Superior General, at first entrusted these materials to Brother Bernard, a man in his early twenties, to organize into a biography. The young Brother proved unequal to the task, and only a part of his work remains, and that only in manuscript form. Meanwhile, in 1723, the Founder's nephew, Dom François-Élie Maillefer, had completed his own version of the life of his uncle, and this likewise long remained unpublished.[1]

The first published biography of the Founder was the work of Canon Jean-Baptiste Blain, a friend from De La Salle's later years and at one time ecclesiastical superior of the Brothers in the archdiocese of Rouen. Commissioned by the Superior to write the official biography, Blain had at his disposal all of the documents that had been collected, as well as the manuscript of Bernard and a copy of Maillefer's work. Blain's biography was first published in Rouen in 1733, and it is the text of that first edition which is presented here in translation.

Jean-Baptiste Blain was born in 1674 at Rennes, in western France. After studies at the Jesuit College in Rennes, where Saint Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort was a classmate, he entered the Seminary of Saint Sulpice in Paris. Ordained in 1670, he was appointed a canon of the diocese of Noyon, where Claude-Maur d'Aubigné was soon to become bishop. When D'Aubigné became archbishop of Rouen in 1708, he brought Canon Blain with him to serve as his assistant in his pastoral visits.

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1. Bernard's and Maillefer's biographies are included in *John Baptist de La Salle: Two Early Biographies* (Landover: Lasallian Publications, 1996).

Among other pastoral responsibilities in the archdiocese of Rouen, Blain served as inspector of seminaries, pastor of the parish of Saint Patrice, superior of the minor seminary, counselor for several religious communities, and ecclesiastical superior for the Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Ernemont, as well as for the Brothers of the Christian Schools. In addition to his life of De La Salle, Blain had also written, in 1722, the life of his friend, Grignon de Montfort, who had recently died. Blain himself died in 1751.

Blain's biography of De La Salle is recognized by historians as an authentic documentary source. For more than one hundred years, it was the only published biography of the Founder of the Christian Brothers in any language. It was not available in English until the Arnandez translation first appeared in offset form in 1985.

The modern reader will undoubtedly find Blain's style difficult at first. He is prone to repetition, digression, exaggeration, extended apologetics, and outmoded rhetorical devices, especially rhetorical questions and exclamations, with little concern for historical accuracy or sequence. He has no problem retelling the same story and placing it in several different historical contexts. He sometimes gets carried away with his subject and advances the narrative well beyond the period he is discussing. At the same time, he projects back into the lifetime of the Founder developments that occurred only after his death, such as the pursuit of papal approval, the vows of religion, and the Bull of Approbation. In the same vein, Blain's ardent anti-Jansenism colors his interpretation of events prior to the controversy generated by the publication in 1714 in France of the Bull *Unigenitus* condemning Jansenism.

In spite of these shortcomings, there is perhaps no better way to immerse oneself in the spirituality and mindset of the seventeenth and early eighteenth century than to read Blain's account. It must be remembered also that the biographer's primary purpose was to illuminate the life, the achievement, and the sanctity of John Baptist de La Salle, with a view perhaps to eventual canonization. The first step in the canonical process requires proof that the "servant of God," as the candidate is called, practiced virtue to a heroic degree. Accordingly, Blain illustrates and expands on the variety of the Founder's virtues in a way that would be effective in convincing the church tribunal in Rome that his practice was indeed heroic.

With a little patience, and perhaps some selective speed reading, the contemporary reader will find in Blain's work much that is indispensable for anyone wishing to understand John Baptist de La Salle, his times, and his educational vision. Blain was a contemporary and

friend of De La Salle and a witness and participant in many of the events reported. He knew and could interview many of the early Brothers. He had the written documents at hand and often quotes them verbatim; he can tell a good story and has an eye for significant detail. For these reasons, a well-produced and accurate English translation of Blain's classic text is long overdue.

The original text is in two quarto volumes, each divided into two books. Volume one begins with four pages, in large type, of a "Letter of Dedication" addressed to the Holy Child Jesus. In the original, this dedication is followed by the *Privilege du Roy*, a formal text constituting royal permission to publish and affording copyright protection. There follows what the author identifies as a *Discours*, that is, a discourse or treatise featuring a vigorous defense of the new communities of Brothers and Sisters teaching in the Christian and Gratuitous Schools, interspersed with historical sections detailing significant moments in the development of catechetics. Blain begins book one of his biography only on page 117 of the original volume one.

Since Blain's introductory material is excessively long, considerably outdated, largely rhetorical in nature, and not part of the life story of De La Salle, it has been omitted in this English volume devoted exclusively to the biography. But since there is much in Blain's introduction that is of historical interest, an English translation has been prepared and, it is hoped, will one day be available in a separate volume serving as an introduction to the main part of Blain's work.

Book one of Blain's biography covers the events in De La Salle's life from his birth to the distribution of his wealth to the poor. Book two, which covers the central portion of De La Salle's life, completes volume one of the original edition.

Volume two of the 1733 edition consists of book three, which concludes the biography proper, and book four, which Blain entitled *His Spirit, Sentiments, and Virtues*. For more than a century, book four has had an independent life in English translation; it has been published separately in a new translation with extensive editing and commentary by Brother Edwin Bannon.[2]

The three individually bound books that constitute the biography are presented here in content and style that are as close as possible to Blain's original. Occasionally, where useful, explanatory material is given in footnotes. In the initial printed edition, the paragraphs are quite long and dense; subheadings occur only in the margins. To

2. *The Mind and Heart of Saint John Baptist de La Salle* (Oxford: De La Salle Publications, 1998).

make for easier reading, the paragraphs in this edition have been broken up to some extent, and subheadings derived from the marginal notes in the original have been introduced here and there. In the 1733 edition, the table of contents (found at the back of each book) reproduces the extensive titles given at the head of each chapter. To be more helpful to the modern reader, this edition provides an abbreviated table of contents at the beginning of each of the three books.

Blain uses several devices when he is quoting. Sometimes quotations are set off by quotation marks; sometimes they are in italics. At other times, there are no quotation marks at all, yet he uses the form of direct ("he said," and so forth), rather than of indirect, discourse. Internal evidence shows that many of these extended quotes may be reconstructed discourses or conversations. As an aid to interpretation, Blain's usage is duplicated here—quotation marks and italics are preserved where Blain uses them; quotation marks are omitted where he omits them, even in direct discourse. As a rule, Blain does not cite in the text the source of biblical quotations; the few citations that are found in the margins will here be put in footnotes. It should also be noted that Blain is usually quoting from the Latin Vulgate or from a French translation of it that does not always correspond to modern translations based on the Hebrew text.

In the use of clerical titles, there is no exact correspondence between French and English usage. Thus the French use Monsieur or simply M. to designate both diocesan priests and lay gentlemen. The title Abbé was used both for the abbot of a monastery as well as for a diocesan priest. The French usage of Père to differentiate priest members of religious orders from diocesan priests is here retained. Once the identity of the persons in the narrative has been established, such titles are often omitted, and only the surname is used.

Blain, following French custom, almost never uses the given Christian name. Thus De La Salle is always M. de La Salle, the "pious Founder," the "servant of God," the "holy priest," or some other title, never simply John Baptist. Christian names are also omitted here, except for the rare instances where Blain uses them. He relies on the context to identify the antecedents of the pronouns he uses extensively as the subjects of his sentences. That usage is preserved here.

It is hoped that these efforts to reproduce in English as much as possible of the style and the feel of Blain's work will give English-speaking scholars more direct access to this invaluable source for Lasallian studies.

Luke Salm, FSC, editor
15 May 1999

# Acknowledgements

This translation of the biography itself—books one, two, and three, bound individually—is the work of Richard Arnandez, FSC, of De La Salle Institute, Lafayette, Louisiana. Hilary Gilmartin, FSC, was the editor for the offset publication in 1985, with Richard Rush, FSC, as principal reader and Patrick Walsh, FSC, as proofreader. For this present edition, Fred Dillenberg, FSC, and Bernard Richard, FSC, rendered exceptional services in computerizing the text to facilitate the editing process. The preliminary editing was begun by Francis Huether, FSC; Luke Salm, FSC, completed the editing process. The initial stages of the publication process were set in motion by William Quaintance, FSC, at the time Director of Publications for the Christian Brothers Conference. Final copy editing and supervision of the publication have been in the capable hands of Paul Grass, FSC, who succeeds as Executive Director of Lasallian Publications. The editors are grateful to him and to the Brother Visitors, who constitute the Christian Brothers Conference, for their financial support, as also to the staff of Saint Mary's Press for the fine appearance of the finished product.

# Book One

# LA VIE
## DE MONSIEUR
# JEAN-BAPTISTE
# DE LA SALLE,
## INSTITUTEUR
## DES FRERES DES ECOLES
## CHRE'TIENNES.

## LIVRE PREMIER.

*Où Monſieur* De La Salle *eſt repreſenté aux Enfans & aux jeunes Gens, comme un Modéle 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 Modéle de Vertus dans tous ces âges & dans tous ces états différens.*

### CHAPITRE PREMIER.

*Sa Naiſſance, ſon Enfance & ſon Education.*

I. Sa naiſſance.

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 Brouillet, encore plus recommandable par ſa piété que par ſa Nobleſſe, avoit ſoin de cultiver dans une édifiante



Title page of Book One from the original 1733 edition of Blain's *Life*. Cahiers lasalliens 7 (Rome: Maison Saint Jean-Baptiste de La Salle, 1961), p. 117.

# Book One

*In this book, Monsieur de La Salle is represented to children and young people as a model of the virtues appropriate to their age, to clerics as a reflection of the ecclesiastical spirit, and to priests as an image of sacerdotal holiness; the innocence and moral purity of his infancy and early years; a Christian child, a devout scholar, a fervent cleric, and a zealous priest, he is a model of virtue at each of these stages of his life and in all of these different occupations.*

## Chapter I

*His birth, childhood, and education.*

The city of Reims, in the province of Champagne, birthplace in the past of so many saints and other great persons, has been honored in more recent years by the birth of Monsieur de La Salle. His father, who belonged to a very distinguished family, occupied the position of councillor 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 its piety than for its nobility. 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 from among the five boys and two girls, four consecrated themselves to his service. One daughter entered the convent of Saint-Étienne-les-Dames; one of the sons joined the Canons Regular of Saint Géneviève 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 Reims.

One of these latter was Monsieur de La Salle, born on 30 April 1651. He received baptism that same day, the godparents being Monsieur Jean Moët de Brouillet and his wife, Madame Perrette Lespagnol, maternal grandfather and grandmother. They gave him the name 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.

## His childhood bent

From the cradle he seemed to have been singled out by grace, which 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.[1] 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 attraction to 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. 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 only to present to him some pious object or other connected 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, he found in his heart no satisfaction in it. 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

1. Tobit 1:4.

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 the Lord's temple to adore the Lord God of Israel.*[2]

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 his youthfulness enhanced and which lent added charm to his natural beauty, 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?*[3]

## His attraction to God's service

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 instructive answers. If anyone brushed his queries aside or delayed to reply, his gracious manner insisted in such a pleasant way that it would be difficult for anyone to resist.

Although everything he witnessed in church charmed his heart, it was the celebration of holy Mass that attracted him most strongly and most obviously. This led him to want to learn how to serve Mass. Eager to acquire this sacred knowledge, he was in a hurry to receive the lessons he needed, which he quickly put into practice. He was not satisfied with being a mere spectator at Mass. He longed one day to be its minister. 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, he applied for admission among the altar boys, and he fulfilled his duties with such extraordinary grace and

2. Tobit 1:5.
3. Luke 1:66.

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 approach 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.

## His modesty and reverence in church

This respectful reverence always accompanied him when he entered holy places, 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 serious and devout that when later he was exercising his priestly functions, an observer might have thought him a seraph in human form. Never did he grow complacent at the altar, even though once he was ordained he approached it daily in order to celebrate the divine mysteries. Each day saw his preparation grow more thorough, his faith and his reverence, the sentiment of his own unworthiness, and 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 ancient Fathers, of deep reflection on the sanctity of the priesthood, or 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 as 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.

## His dislike for secular amusements

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 as a child, 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

preferences. 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.

The young De La Salle did not care to store up in his memory songs of which it is better to be ignorant 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. Indeed, insofar as it depended on him, he 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 perform the functions of a canon.

His father, who was a deeply convinced 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 sensitive 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 the Gospel uses when speaking of the child Jesus.

## His early studies

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 college of the University of Reims, 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 and never to separate study from his efforts to acquire piety.

In his case, application to course work did not, as so often happens, lead to a diminution in his spirit of devotion, nor did his devotion interfere with his application to study. Thus both God and his teachers were pleased with him, because he was always 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 become the pattern of youthful clerics.

## Chapter II

*His entry into the clerical state and his reception into the illustrious corps of the Canons of the Cathedral of Reims.*

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 childhood 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.[4]

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 his parents had been allowed to choose the holocaust which they were called upon to offer God, they would no doubt have

4. In giving the tonsure, the administering prelate clips a small piece of hair from the crown of the recipient's head, indicating that the recipient is entering the clerical state.

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 its 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 his heart when he saw himself free to follow the 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.

## He receives the tonsure

Young De La Salle's reception of the 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. Let us not anticipate but rather proceed with the stages of his life by following the stages of grace.

Having become a cleric, John Baptist de La Salle 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 Reims 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 more ardent zeal for his clerical functions, his more obvious 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 by an instinct of grace.

## He is appointed canon of Reims at the age of seventeen

On 9 July 1666, when he was around seventeen years old, he was appointed a canon of the metropolitan church of Reims, through the resignation of Monsieur Dozet, archdeacon of Champagne and chancellor of the University, and he took possession of his canonry the following year, on 17 January. 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 it.

Thus the new canon 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 accede to those of others—such are the natural tendencies of human 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 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 oneself a canon, one might think 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, which is 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 befit young canons and which we 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. Our young canon knew how to protect himself against these dangers by observing with attention those among the canons 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 as a canon 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, and the bishop's official counselors. How can they carry out such honorable duties unless they possess uncommon learning?

## He applies himself earnestly to his studies

For this reason, the Council of Trent urged that at least two-thirds of the members of cathedral chapters should be men holding doctoral 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 service, of helping by their wise advice the prelates who so often are overburdened with thorny problems and who must decide such very difficult cases. Our young canon, then, went along with the spirit and intentions of the Church, and he pursued his studies with renewed ardor. In fact, he needed learning more than did many others, since Divine Providence destined him to be the Founder of a new congregation of men devoted to instructing the young and teaching Christian doctrine.

At the completion of his course in philosophy, De La Salle received, as was the custom, the degree of Master of Arts. This first step toward the doctorate, which was still a long way off, made him think of pursuing it at the fountainhead of the sciences, the University of Paris. 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 twofold goal he had set himself: to become a saint and a scholar.

As we all know, while study should help us 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, then, 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 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.

## He enters the Seminary of Saint Sulpice

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. Never was there a house of studies where he would feel more at home. There he found the very source 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, Monsieur 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, Tronson displayed nothing of his merely human traits to those who in great numbers came to consult him. Like an angel—without passion, without natural impulse, always perfectly calm—he found in heavenly wisdom the solutions to the thorniest difficulties and such wise counsels that they seemed dictated by the Holy Spirit. 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 Reims entered it. God was leading him into paths of which at the moment he had no idea 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 new angels like Raphael 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 interior 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 Monsieur Boüin,[5] 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.

Many other saintly souls were trained by that man of God. How many holy priests and fervent ministers did he prepare for the Church of Jesus Christ! How many evangelical laborers, such as Saint Paul described 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 who sought entry with pure intention and a sincere desire to give themselves to God, he 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!

## An exemplary young man in the seminary

From the start, he seemed to be endowed with a gentle nature. Far from drawing down on himself the least reproach or 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

5. More often spelled Baüin. In fact, Baüin served as the Founder's spiritual director in a later period at Vaugirard. Baüin had not yet joined the Sulpicians when De La Salle was a seminarian.

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 disdained, 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 about 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 Monsieur Tronson, the late Monsieur Leschassier, 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 Leschassier agrees completely with the verdict of many other ecclesiastics living in various provinces of the kingdom who had lived with De La Salle while he was at the seminary. 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! We would have thought that God, who had brought him 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 De La Salle himself and of his virtuous parents. But oh, the depths of the designs of God! The Most High decided otherwise. He had brought the young canon 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. God 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 De La Salle 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 when the untimely death of his parents left them as orphans and entrusted them to his care. 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 re-enter it by another.

## Chapter III

*Death of his parents; he leaves the seminary; family duties; he advances in Holy Orders; his determination to seek 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 20 July 1671.

This cruel blow for a heart as tender as his did not cause him to interrupt his studies, but it did lead him to delay for some time the pledging of himself to the clerical state. God allowed all this in order to make that resolve all the more solid and pure. De La Salle was to walk on the road to Calvary all the rest of his life, and 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 divorce himself from it totally, solemnly, and forever.

## The death of his father obliges him to leave the Seminary of Saint Sulpice

The wound which the death of his mother had opened in his heart had not had time to heal fully when the news of the death of his father reopened it, making the hurt even deeper and more painful. His father's death occurred some nine months later, on 9 April 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, he was in a place where he found in his superiors and directors a tender charity, a fatherly heart, and unfailing kindness. Nevertheless, it soon became necessary for him to go back to Reims, and this need disturbed him more than anything else. Family business, domestic cares, and the responsibility for his orphaned brothers and sisters were calling him. 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 this young cleric 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 18 October 1670 found himself obliged to say good-bye to it with a like regret on 19 April 1672.

De La Salle 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 innermost 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 Messieurs Tronson, Boüin, and Leschassier, whose guidance he eagerly sought and whose counsels he considered as law.

He was only twenty-one when he found himself in charge of his father's house, the education of his brothers and sisters, and the affairs of the family. 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 anxiety. 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 we should hear the words, *Friend, go up higher.*

## He places himself under the guidance of Monsieur Roland

He was fully accustomed to the Sulpician practice of not doing anything without permission and of sanctifying the least actions by performing them through obedience; therefore, he took care not to proceed on his own initiative in a matter of such supreme importance. Filled with these convictions but no longer being a seminarian, he looked about for a man endowed with the spirit of Saint Sulpice to become his spiritual director. He found one in Monsieur Roland,[6] a canon like himself and the theological preacher of the cathedral of Reims. This zealous canon, 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 of a canon's duties. 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 Reims, 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 impoverished orphan girls.

Having chosen Roland to be his visible guardian angel, De La Salle abandoned himself completely to his direction. No doubt, in thus turning to the chapter's theological preacher, he had no idea of the designs of Providence in his regard. They were, however, beginning to make themselves felt, leading him by this choice into God's purposes in his regard. 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 educational enterprise of Monsieur Roland, excellent though it was, was only a rough sample of what Providence

6. Nicolas Roland (1642–1678) was beatified by Pope John Paul II on 16 October 1994.

wished to bring into being through De La Salle, for the latter's zeal was not to be limited to the city of Reims but was destined to produce its effects throughout France.

### *He will become great before the Lord*

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 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 to establish throughout France, despite all the antagonism of men and all the efforts of hell, the Christian and Gratuitous Schools.

Guided no doubt by some supernatural insight, 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 doctrine 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 develop a taste for the instruction of young people. It was from the depths of the older canon's zeal that the younger canon developed his first enthusiasm for the Christian and Gratuitous Schools which fortunately he established throughout the kingdom.

## He receives the four minor orders and the subdiaconate

Since Roland's virtue deserved De La Salle's total confidence, it also warranted his total obedience. Following the orders of his director, De La Salle delayed no longer in fixing himself definitively in the clerical state by assuming perpetual obligations. Because there were no ordinations in Reims just then, he was obliged to go elsewhere for the ceremony. First he went to Laon, then to Noyon, and finally to Cambrai, where the four "minor orders"[7]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? That is something we do not know. His memoirs

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7. In fact, the four "minor orders" of porter, lector, acolyte, and exorcist had been conferred on De La Salle four years earlier, in March 1668, by the bishop of Soissons in the palace of the archbishop of Reims.

do not tell us anything about a point of such importance. 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 from it.

De La Salle always retained both the attraction for the Seminary of Saint Sulpice and the intention of returning there to complete his course of studies and to perfect his knowledge of ecclesiastical science. The further he progressed in virtue, the more he was attracted to that residence which provides so many edifying examples, so many means of sanctification, and so much help to attain it. However, the family affairs which kept him in Reims 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 interior prayer—I was about to say, into a sort of seminary like Saint Sulpice—and he proceeded to receive from the School of Theology in Reims the degrees that Divine Providence had not allowed him to complete at the Sorbonne. A man of study and prayer, he divided his time between these two occupations, and if he withdrew a few moments from both, it was to devote them to good 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 Monsieur de La Salle suggested this flattering comparison, and more than once when he ministered at the altar, when he was at prayer, or on other occasions, people might have thought, as people of the time 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 celebrates holy Mass.*

De La Salle had yet to receive the priesthood. To prepare himself for ordination, he renewed his efforts to achieve self-discipline and sought to increase his fervor, in order to measure up to the eminent dignity to which he aspired. More complete separation from the world, stricter regularity of life, closer vigilance over himself, more profound recollection, renewed application to study, modesty, devotion, greater 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 prepare himself? Did not a responsibility, fearful even for the angels, and a dignity which those heavenly spirits might well find too weighty, call for the most intense preparation? 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 the first superior of the Minor Seminary of Saint Sulpice, used to tell his disciples that they had to be blind when they presented themselves for ordination: either blind through sin and passion or blind through a childlike obedience in which rational analysis has no part.

The man who proposed this maxim[8] had exemplified it in his own life; he had put off his own ordination for many years on account of 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. As he presented himself for ordination, he could not conceal his terror, much like a man being dragged to the torture, if I may so describe him.

## De La Salle is ordained to the priesthood

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, if I dare say so, the holy and sacred horror with regard to an ordination which, while raising him to the pinnacle of the temple, also exposed him to the furious assaults of the wicked spirit and showed him

8. A marginal note in the 1733 edition identifies this priest as Monsieur [Antoine] Brenier (the first superior of the Minor Seminary of Saint Sulpice).

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, 9 April 1678, at the age of twenty-seven, at the hands of his own archbishop in the metropolitan church of Reims, where he served as a canon. He put no interval between his ordination and his first Mass, because his entire life had been one long preparation for celebrating this awesome sacrifice, while 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 for sins.*

Having thus become a priest of the new covenant, De La Salle hastened to fulfill his ministry and to carry out his principal duty, which was to sacrifice the Divine Victim and to offer to God an immolated God. All his life he had felt such a great yearning for this divine function, such an attraction and so much zeal for it, that later on, he never failed to mount the altar to celebrate, except when it was impossible for him to do so. His religious awe, respect, and devotion toward this most august of all mysteries did not keep him away from it. 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 function of his priesthood and as a daily obligation for himself.

At the same time, to make sure that he would celebrate with grace and benefit, he strove to live in a manner befitting his august functions and in a way which would make him worthy to repeat this sacrifice every day. His eagerness to say holy 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 daily. For fear that this frequent 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 says his first Mass in the cathedral

In the cathedral, on the day after his ordination, he celebrated his first Mass with no special fanfare. He wanted it that way in the hope of

maintaining himself in total recollection, in 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 faith in the real presence of Jesus Christ in the Blessed Sacrament and to feel sentiments of true devotion spring up in the heart, all a person needed to do was to watch the young priest offering sacrifice at the altar. People used to come to his Mass to be edified and touched in order 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, in order 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. 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 who drew near to him. His youth created no obstacle to the confidence which his piety inspired, for even though he was just a young priest, he seemed already to be a saint.

## His devotion in celebrating brings people to his Mass and to seek his advice

He possessed the Spirit of God. Everyone was sure of this, especially those who had assisted at his Mass. The result was that he was besieged by persons who came to him to receive from his lips the advice of 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 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 dispelled people's doubts, resolved their difficulties, and gave them rules for their conduct. He adapted himself to varying personalities; 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 the faithful what God had taught him. Such a priest was truly fit to become an instrument of God's greatest designs, the mouthpiece for divine oracles. So he had become a man of God, responsible for human interests before God and of God's interests before the people. Taught by God alone, he knew what he had to announce to the faithful 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 fellow human beings.

It frequently happened, however, that when he left the altar after his colloquies with God, De La Salle was not able to begin dealing with people right away; he was so absorbed in the Creator he had just received that he could scarcely turn his attention to anyone or anything else. What a happy obstacle to charity toward 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. 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 obligations 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 than his true self: 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 death to the senses by 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 our young priest and serve to reveal the depths of his interior life.

Not that Monsieur de La Salle was able to close his eyes and ears to everything surrounding him or that he lived like a savage, refusing to take part in polite social contacts. He did nothing singular or out of place. Like Jesus Christ, he lived as a man among 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 everything, that we can truly say that he saw without seeing and listened without hearing. Nothing of what he saw or heard made a deep impression on his soul or was able to penetrate the depths of his heart.

When standing at the altar, was he 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 wanderings of a distracted mind nor the illusions of a vagabond imagination. This privilege is

certainly a very precious one, most extraordinary and unusual. 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 not saying Mass made him suffer more than the illness itself. Sometimes he found within himself sufficient strength and 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.

## He often experiences ecstasy when celebrating

After Communion he frequently fell into deep ravishment, 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 of which as yet he had no inkling 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 human heart 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, when the young minister of the Lord gave proof of his zeal by censuring an ecclesiastic who was giving bad example, there was a storm of criticism and 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. This, however, 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 one giving scandal. He did not succeed in the conversion, but he met with success in removing the scandal. He reprimanded the incorrigible person publicly and with so much energy that the guilty man left Reims, preferring to change his residence rather than his way of living.

## Chapter V

*His director proposes that he exchange his canonry with a parish priest in the city of Reims; De La Salle obeys; his virtuous and blind submission on this occasion.*

Noting the progress that his disciple was making in perfection and his great docility to the suggestions made to him, Monsieur Roland resolved to take advantage of these dispositions for a special project he had in mind. 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. This story shows in its true colors the state of soul of the young canon shortly after his ordination to the priesthood[9] and brings out the detachment, total indifference, submission, and spirit of sacrifice that characterized his life at this time.

9. In fact, this proposal was made two years before De La Salle was ordained a priest. At the time, lack of priesthood was no obstacle to appointment as pastor of a parish.

## Roland suggests that he exchange his canonry for a parish

Seeing his disciple *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, the 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 the vocation of a canon in the cathedral churches. These men make up the senate of the local church. 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, always *ready to undertake all sorts of good works*.[10]

Roland himself was forgetting that principle, since 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, 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 plan, the theological preacher of the chapter 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 Pierre in Reims. Hence he suggested to him the idea of exchanging his canonry for that parish. 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 in Reims 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 is 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 principal churches.

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10. A marginal note in the 1733 edition cites Van-Eipen's dissertation, *De Institutio & Officiis Canonicorum*.

According to the spirit of the world, by proposing that De La Salle should leave his canonry in order to become a parish priest, Roland was suggesting that he come down a step or two in the ecclesiastical world and 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?

## Difficulties with Roland's plan

Considerable opposition arose in connection with the director's plan. The parish of Saint Pierre in Reims was a very extensive one and 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 orphaned 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 wrenching pain to leave? Could he combine his pastoral responsibilities with those of his guardianship?

Either 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 Muhammadans, yet his project failed, even though it had certainly been inspired by the Spirit of God.

Perhaps God, who not long afterward 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 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, who 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 parish of Saint Pierre in Reims. As soon as he heard Roland's suggestion, De La Salle accepted it without question and without rational analysis. 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 that was asked of the young canon was this act of consent. God beheld in this disposition of heart an excellent preparation for the great sacrifices that he would be inspired to make later on. After having tried him, like Abraham, and put his obedience, fidelity, detachment, and love to the test, the Lord was content and without refusing the sacrifice, postponed it by inspiring a superior authority to oppose it. Here is how this came about.

## The archbishop of Reims rejects the exchange

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. The two interested parties who had come seeking his consent were quite surprised when the prelate told each to remain in the calling which God had chosen for him. This directive from the mouth of the prelate was accepted by our canon as a directive from God himself, and he submitted to the voice of his higher superior with the same docility that had made him obey that of the lower. He had been willing to be a parish priest only because he thought that was what God was asking by the mouth of Monsieur Roland; he was no longer willing to be a parish priest as soon as Archbishop Le Tellier forbade it and told him to forget about it. Later on, he declared several times that he seemed to hear an inner voice which conformed to the external words of the archbishop, the one and the other saying that he was not called to be a parish priest.

The pastor of Saint Pierre, 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, 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 his vineyard, a canon likely to render important services to the diocese. The archbishop realized very well that by allowing De La Salle to tie himself to a parish, he would have restricted the exercise of his talents and that by confining him to a single parish, he would indeed have deprived the rest of his diocese. This, as far as we 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 Reims. On his return home, De La Salle applied himself once more to his duties as a canon and to preparing 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.

## De La Salle applies himself to study and to the canonical Office

De La Salle 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 Monsieur Roland, his director, he found a model in this regard, for the chapter's theological preacher 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 choir stalls at the cathedral. Roland saw good crying out to be done everywhere, 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 Reims.

I do not know whether I am putting the death of M. Roland in its proper place here, for the various memoirs on the life of De La Salle do not agree on this point, on the time when the plan arose for exchanging his canonry, which we have already mentioned, or on several other matters.[11] In writing the lives of those who have died in the odor of sanctity, however, 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, the precise dates of which we have not been able to verify, it will not prevent people from being edified.

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 Monsieur de La Salle to his true path in life. The young canon became the successor of the chapter's theological preacher in his apostolic work and the heir of all 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.

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11. In fact, the offer of a parish took place two years before De La Salle's ordination and the death of Roland.

## Roland dies and leaves De La Salle in charge of his work

As we mentioned before, Monsieur Roland, De La Salle's director, a canon and the theological preacher of the cathedral of Reims, 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 theological preacher 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 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 corrupt practices, 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, in order 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, we cannot teach others what we have not learned ourselves. 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. We must be learners before we can pretend to teach; we must practice for a long time if we wish to teach with results. The solution to 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 teaching them Christian doctrine.

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 principal part of the enterprise, for he never undertook to provide Gratuitous Schools for girls. Père Barré,[12] a Minim filled with apostolic zeal, obedient to the Spirit of God, and active in word and deed, had already been inspired to become involved and so 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 Roland was perhaps the first to know how to profit by the precedent and to establish a Community of school Sisters in Reims.

It was, however, only after his death and thanks to the efforts of De La Salle that Roland's group achieved full success. Toward 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. This Society had scarcely made its appearance as the Sisters of the Child Jesus when God was pleased to call its founder to himself. On his deathbed, Roland's 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 seems to have foretold that he would one day establish the Brothers of the Christian Schools, something Roland had always wanted to do 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 reflections 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

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12. Père Nicolas Barré was beatified by Pope John Paul II on 7 March 1999.

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, so to speak, in its cradle—but without realizing where the hand of God was leading him.

## The difficulties De La Salle faces in establishing Roland's work

Soon enough, however, De La Salle 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 goodwill. Jesus Christ himself devoted only three years to his public life and his evangelical journeys, after spending all his earlier years 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 the young

canon. They inspired him with a holy fear and a prudent restraint, and they 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, *I sanctify myself in order to be able to sanctify you.* 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 provisions made by his deceased friend.

Rising above his own preferences and filled with confidence in God, overcoming all his repugnance by a generous effort, and animated by a zeal which was enlightened by knowledge, he proceeded to honor the memory of the theological preacher 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.

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, 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 devil, 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, God 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 the young canon on this occasion like a youthful pilot responsible for guiding a vessel through a passage full of reefs, amidst the 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 stormy night, so full of difficulties and obstacles, which the world threw in 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 working with Providence and that we join our efforts to the help that comes from God.

## Overcoming obstacles, De La Salle obtains letters patent for the Christian Schools for girls

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[13] from the king—not a very easy undertaking. The city fathers felt that Reims was already overburdened by the various religious 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. The royal court, 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. It would be necessary, therefore, to convince the magistrates, win over the prelate, and persuade him to ask for the letters patent. De La Salle set to work and succeeded in it.

His humble and gentle manners soon won the hearts of his fellow citizens. Because they were quite sure of the purity of his intentions and full of admiration for his virtue, they found it difficult 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. 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

13. Letters patent signed by the king conferred juridical status on corporate bodies, whether civil or ecclesiastical.

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.

De La Salle could also base his request on the need to separate boys and girls in school, even at an early age, and on the dreadful improprieties that result when boys and girls are put together, even for religious instruction. Where no Christian women are available to give a Christian education and proper instruction to the girls, these latter are taught by men. Everyone knows what perils this arrangement presents. Modesty, decency, reserve, and propriety are all at risk, and the same virtues make it necessary to draw a veil of silence over the sad consequences that would follow. To deflect such perils, the Church has always promoted the establishment of Christian Schools where boys and girls are taught separately. At one time, the attitude of the Church was even more severe in this matter, and within church buildings 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 XV, happily reigning, and his grandfather, Louis XIV of happy memory—convinced of the dangers that arise when children of both sexes are taught together, approved measures forbidding this practice, as did several great prelates in their dioceses, confirming this policy by their edicts, as is seen in the second volume of the recent memorandum for the clergy under the title, *Schools*.

Without doubt, Monsieur de La Salle knew how to make use of 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 dispelled objections, answered difficulties, did away with prejudices. His titles as a fellow citizen, as a relative, as a friend, as heir of Monsieur Roland's zeal no less than of his foundation, together with his encouraging and gracious pleas, were the means he used to sway the officials, so that they found it difficult to resist.

Still, his request might have gone unanswered if God himself had not come to his help by secret inspirations and had not seasoned with unction and grace 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 to be 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 own approval, and this 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 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 personally. The matter was as good as settled, once Le Tellier 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 the brother of Monsieur de Louvois wanted something done, everyone hastened to fall in with his wishes.

Never did the archbishop of Reims 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 Archbishop Le Tellier, who hastened to send them to the one who had sought them so successfully. The archbishop 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, favor, and financial contributions, this foundation got off to an excellent start. It soon reached a flourishing state and proved extremely useful to the public.

Thus, if this Community owes its origin to Monsieur Roland, it owes its progress to the diligent care of Monsieur 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 teaching Sisters for Christian and Gratuitous Schools for girls, to become the founder of a new religious order of Brothers destined to exercise a similar holy and noble task for boys.

# Chapter VI

*The servant of God establishes rule and order in his home; worldly people begin to criticize him; he disregards censure and resolutely pursues perfection.*

Young as he was, De La Salle 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 such fidelity to a rule leads to in purity of conduct, innocence of life, and solid virtue, especially when a rule 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. In his home everything was done at its proper time: rising, vocal and interior prayer, meals, spiritual reading, other exercises of piety, and the various actions of the day, with the canonical Office as the center 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 young brothers, who lived with him, to follow a lifestyle which resembled that of a seminary rather than that of a private home. 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, witticisms, and censure made it known to those who had not yet heard of it.

This awareness produced varying effects. What were these? Exactly the same as those which the lives of the saints and the Gospel itself have always produced: 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 footsteps of the saints. 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 until the end of time. What we see now is what was from the beginning. Virtue, persecuted in the person of Abel from the very origin of the world, has continued to suffer ill-treatment of all the just, without exception, who came after him, and so will it continue to suffer in all those who will live until 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.

## Worldly people censure his behavior

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. As the guardian of his brothers and sisters, it seemed that he himself ought to have been put under a guardian. He had a good bit of money but did not know how to make proper use of it. He no longer bothered with respectable people, and respectable people no longer bothered 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 in solitude 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, all this was said 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, *All things work together for the good of those who love God.* He examined himself while the world was examining 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. The severity of his critics led him to condemn these faults himself. 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 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 a solitary 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. He was following the advice of the author of the ***Imitation of Christ***, who says of priests, *Their conversation should not be with the vulgar and common ways of men but with angels in heaven and perfect men on earth.*[14]

His life grew more austere. He mortified his senses more rigorously; his hours of prayer grew more frequent and 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 most common clothes made of the coarsest type of cloth. Before long, Reims would see him wearing the same garb as the Brothers. To the regret of his friends and—if I may say so—to the shame of his relatives, he began to wear in public that disgraceful habit, which is the way people then and for a long time afterward regarded the habit of the Brothers. 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

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14. Thomas à Kempis, *Imitation of Christ*, book 4, chap. 5.

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 without removing the soiled and smelly surplice.

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 against sleep was merely a prelude for others. Interior 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 God 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, in writing his books, or in attending to pressing business concerning his Institute.

To this retrenchment of sleep he added more rigorous fasts, which became excessive during Holy Week. From Holy Thursday until Easter, he tried to eat nothing but broth made from herbs. Having been born with a rather delicate constitution, however, 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 young canon had not the least idea of establishing the 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, we must recall the picture we painted earlier[15] of the disorders 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 founding 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 group 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.

Père 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 person 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 establishments devoted to the training of teachers of both sexes who wish to dedicate themselves to the instruction and sanctification of poor children.

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15. A marginal note in the 1733 edition cites chapter IV of the *Discours* which constitutes Blain's lengthy introduction to the biography proper.

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 future teachers who would provide Christian and gratuitous instruction of the children of the poor —a noble design indeed. If Père 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 God's design, it was De La Salle who was to receive this grace, so true is it that *one plants and another waters, but God gives the increase*, and by his good pleasure, *he sends workers into the field to reap what others have sown.*

## Part of Barré's work succeeds; part does not

Père Barré had established, at the same time, seminaries for schoolmasters and for schoolmistresses. The masters seemed to succeed rather well at first, but this success did not last. The teachers either never really assimilated the spirit of their vocation, or they lost it in a short time. Their fervor was like a straw fire which blazed up for a few moments and then died down. The first disciples of Père Barré 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 priest 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 their founder, a spirit of total disinterestedness and abandonment to Divine Providence. Such people were not at all forthcoming.

Monsieur Roland, of whom we have already spoken, filled with the zeal of Père Barré, did not despair of having better success with a project of his own in Reims. At least he would have made the attempt, but his death prevented it. In him the zealous Minim lost a faithful helper. For his consolation, however, Barré's second foundation—schools for girls—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 Père 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 male teachers did not succeed, but the endeavor was an idea that did not disappear entirely. To the human eye, 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, Monsieur Roland, as well as other saintly persons, 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 God 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 pioneers conceived the idea, wanted to bring it about, and neglected nothing to make it succeed; their goodwill 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; the outcome will be seen in what follows.

# Chapter VII

*The hidden paths by which Divine Providence imperceptibly brings De La Salle to carry out its designs through a man sent to Reims by Madame Maillefer to open Gratuitous Schools; a summary of the admirable life that this woman led after her conversion.*

Since it was Madame Maillefer[16] who began crystallizing the plans of Providence in the life of Monsieur 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 M. Nyel to Reims 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.

## Early life of Madame Maillefer

Not a great deal is known of her life, but we do know that Madame Maillefer was converted when still quite young and before the death of her husband. She did not wait until 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

16. Blain consistently but erroneously calls her Madame *de* Maillefer. It was only after her death that her son acquired the right to use the *de*, conferring a kind of noble status. In this English edition, she is named without Blain's *de*.

Reims of a wealthy family. She married Pons Maillefer, controller of the city of Rouen,[17] where she took up her residence and lived until 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 in order to appear like one, 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 while on her way 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 worshiped there, and more to find admirers than to adore God.

## Her worldly spirit

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 was she 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 fashionable and striking clothes, the rarest and costliest hair styles. 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 appreciating 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.

17. Her husband, Pons Maillefer, was a draper, which accounts for her interest in clothes. It was her son who became the controller in Rouen.

Never was there a woman more totally enslaved by her body or one who worshiped 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 made to her measure. This was a kind of idol to her impressive appearance, shaped exactly like her; on it she could indulge her vanity. She used it to try on the various articles of clothing and other ornaments she planned to wear. She dressed it, 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 also for that of others, 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 dances or the theater, at the opera or on outings, or in social gatherings.

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 her good friend, Madame Louvet, called her "My Queen," even after her conversion, to remind her of the grand and majestic air which she knew well how to put on and of the sumptuous attire she wore to enhance the effect.

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, her servants sought out the choicest viands, the tastiest fruit for her table. Nothing was too expensive; as long as it was unusual and delicious, they bought it, whatever the price.

## Her harshness toward the poor

As we 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 toward 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

he could let the beggar in. Such an act of charity, so appropriate toward a person so much in need, did not appeal to a woman as worldly as she was, one who loved nobody but herself. We know how selfishness makes people cruel; 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.

With scorn and indignation, Madame Maillefer 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 the beggar dead on the miserable couch where he had lain! The news of this unfortunate occurrence spread throughout the house and did not take long to reach the mistress's 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 divine mercy, not 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.

## Her conversion

Three vices had ruled her: vanity, laziness, and hard-heartedness toward the unfortunate. The three contrary virtues of humility, mortification, and charity for the poor now became her characteristics. 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 and foolish behavior, and she 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.

## Her love of abjection

Ultimately, to expiate her hard-heartedness toward the poor, Madame Maillefer 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 hunt 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 confirm it further 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 laughingstock 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: not the world, not her body, not 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 equaled her previous insensitivity toward 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.

At first, she forbade herself all fancy clothes, elaborate gowns, and showy adornments. Then, from simple attire she went to dresses that were very common, from these to ones which were shabby, and

then to garb that made her look ridiculous. In this way she pursued the spirit of vanity to its last refuge, and 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. God, as it were, took pleasure in presenting her to the public 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 Reims and does not seem to have lived very long after his father's death.[18] His widow, who rivaled her mother-in-law in piety, lived in Reims 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 an aura 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, who 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 that 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 basket full 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 had

18. In fact, the son survived his father, who died in 1681, by twenty years.

finished. Madame Maillefer then took the key and, after making arrangements for all the needs of the seamstress, went off to spend the day in church and at the hospital, returning only at nightfall to free her prisoner. In order 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 hair shirt. She obtained workmen's shoes which had no soles to them, coarse stockings all patched, and a sash like the rest. In those days, ladies wore velvet sashes lined with taffeta; 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 high society. 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 laughingstock 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, Monsieur de 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 were appropriate to bewail her sins. Her attitude, her gestures, all her exterior appearance, unkempt and disheveled, 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 Madame Maillefer 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 her shoulder. When people said something to humiliate or insult her, she was happy and 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 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 for 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 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 beggary. 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. Because 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 both 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 people 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—that was what everyone was saying. The very street urchins hooted after her and ran behind her yelling, "The crazy lady, 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. 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 begging. 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 in order 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 underclothing 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, Monsieur de 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 in this matter, 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 I must humble myself 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 in order 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, shrank from it with horror, and 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 a person 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, in order 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, even more than during her life, be 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 we try 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.

## Her penance and charity

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 a holy spirit of 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 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 pretend to 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 passersby would think she was indeed a pauper being fed out of charity.

When she went to visit the school she had founded at Darnétal, 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 who was 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 Mont Saint Catherine, 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 that 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 you; turn aside your 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 unpleasantness of the weather as though she had no body or had lost all feeling. At first she used heavy, common material for her chemises; 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 the usual 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, 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 worshiper 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 interior prayer all flourished, 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 clothespress, trunk, nor any other furniture. She slept on a bit of straw on the floor or on an old carpenter's trestle. Her only valuable piece of furniture, according to the neighbors, was a bookcase which supplied the materials for reading and for her prayers during part of the night.

Ordinarily, she spent her time either at the Cathedral of Notre Dame or at the hospital of the Madeleine, 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.

Toward the end of her life, she went to a sort of boarding house near Notre Dame to eat and drink, so that she could have more time to pray before the image of the Most Blessed Virgin on the altar of petitions. 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 the parish of Saint Nicaise, opposite the Gravelines.

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 the Madeleine was filled with people ill with purple fever, 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 Madeleine only at ten at night, less to go for 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 bade 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 superior 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. Monsieur 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 as she did!"

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 no money, furniture, or 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. After having been the town scandal, she 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.[19] A large number of the faithful still live who 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 an aunt of Monsieur de Monville, a president of magistrates. She is Mademoiselle de Monville, now eighty-five years old, and she knew Madame Maillefer very well,[20] since both of them had the same spiritual director. There is also the testimony 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 Père 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 the idea of such schools for boys as well.

This is the way Divine Providence led Monsieur de La Salle to carry out this design. Madame Maillefer was inspired to provide for the poor children in her native city of Reims the same benefits that she had afforded those at Darnétal. She therefore made arrangements with Monsieur 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 girls in this new establishment led Monsieur Roland and Madame Maillefer to entertain a great desire to establish something similar for boys. In 1673 the two of them had laid plans aimed at bringing this about, but these had been frustrated by Roland's death. The generous benefactress did not let his

19. Madame Maillefer died in the plague of 1693–94. Blain was writing sometime before 1733.

20. Madame de Monville, forty-five years old when Madame Maillefer died, would have been about five years old in the period "before the conversion."

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 Roland could no longer help her, she was inspired to try to find someone else in Reims 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 Reims 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. Madame Maillefer thought she had found such a man in Monsieur Adrien 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 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 Reims, Madame Maillefer had undertaken to furnish them 100 écus a year and had given them a written promise to this effect.

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

Divine Providence, which controls events in order to bring about its own ends, saw to it that Monsieur de La Salle happened to be entering the Sisters' convent just as Nyel and his young companion 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 God's 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 religious 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 Reims, for he personally had neither the inclination nor the grace for it. He was not really suited for an undertaking of this nature, as the sequel was to show. He was, then, merely the providential instrument for getting it started. Once it was under way, Nyel, who brought De La Salle into it, would move on, leaving him alone to carry out God's purposes.

## CHAPTER VIII

*Opening of Christian and Gratuitous Schools for boys in Reims.*

Monsieur Nyel had reached Reims 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, as people do 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 Superior 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 Superior. What could she reply? True, Nyel was no stranger to her, but his project, although planned while Monsieur Roland was still alive, seemed to her something unusual and daring, and its success very problematical.

It was, however, 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 Superior 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 Monsieur de La Salle, a relative of hers.[21] In this letter, she begged him to use his influence to

21. They were distantly related by marriage. The Founder's great-grandfather and the grandmother of Madame Maillefer's husband were brother and sister. Also, her husband's Aunt Rose was married to the Founder's uncle, Simon de La Salle.

help Nyel and her to set up in Reims 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.

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 deceased friend, and the 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 it would come to that, he would not have put a finger to it, such was his distaste, not for the work itself—which he considered excellent—but for becoming its promoter and leader.

De La Salle, not aware that he was assuming any special obligation, charitably offered to help Nyel in any way he could. He praised Nyel's 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 no less necessary, for a plan that is publicized too early 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 Institute of School Sisters had as yet barely subsided. If it were noised abroad that 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 let him leave.

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 Reims if your steps took you to the house of the brother of your benefactress. 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 well-known canon and theological preacher, respected and revered in the city, founded a society of women teachers for the schools, 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, still less 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?"

## De La Salle invites Nyel to stay with him

These arguments were only too well founded and made Nyel realize the risk he would have run if he were 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. De La Salle 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; "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 reside, so as to veil your project from public scrutiny. You look somewhat 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 you 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,[22] 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 plan, 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 Reims, one which suited his projects well, 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 urged Nyel 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 schoolteacher; that was all he meant to do. But it was not all that God had in mind, the 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.

## Steps taken by De La Salle to introduce Gratuitous Schools for boys in Reims

Filled with many thoughts, the pious canon consulted God and examined in his presence how he should handle such a delicate matter.

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22. An ancient and celebrated shrine not far from Laon, Nyel's hometown. Later on, De La Salle and his Brothers would make pilgrimages there.

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, Père Claude Bretagne, at this time prior of the Abbey of Saint Remy in Reims and later of Saint Germain in Paris, with which our saintly canon was closely connected. 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 Père 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 to get these Christian and Gratuitous Schools off to a good start," he said to them, "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 would 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 the next 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. The matter was discussed, and it was agreed that the choice should go to one of 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 were well thought of by his superiors, but unfortunately they do not like him, and so we had better not consider him further. The

second man does not have much judgment. The third is the nephew and toady of the diocesan *officialis*, owes him everything he has become, and is devoted to him. It would take only a word from his uncle and benefactor, and he would send all of the schoolmasters away. We cannot pick him either." This third man, however, was the candidate favored by Père 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 Monsieur Dorigny, the pastor of Saint Maurice. He was a 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*,[23] who by reason of his position might oppose the opening of this school; in fact he tried to do so but in vain.

All those consulted 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 coordinate measures to insure success, De La Salle was advised to contact him at once.

This mission he carried out with full success. As we 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 pastor 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 Monsieur 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

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23. A diocesan superintendent of schools and protector of the teachers in the Little Schools, especially when their franchises would be threatened by competition from parish schools for the poor.

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, that would be of great advantage to him, and that would cost him nothing.

"All we are asking you," added De La Salle, "is to present yourself as the founder of this school and to lend it your name. Your 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 Monsieur Nyel and his companion, whom we are proposing to you as teachers in your school. Take them in. 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 it offered 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 assistants, not men who were simply on loan, as it were, and whose expenses were paid by someone else.

## Opening of the school in the parish of Saint Maurice in 1679

De La Salle was not slow in agreeing to the offer made by Monsieur Dorigny and asked him whether he would be satisfied with the annual grant of 100 écus, which Madame Maillefer, though her name was not mentioned, would provide for the two teachers. The bargain was struck with great satisfaction on both sides. Thus the first Christian and Gratuitous School for boys was opened in Reims 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 Reims 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 personalities. 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 traits of character, so that despite differences they can cooperate in the execution of the divine designs. The infinitely skillful divine hand can make use of the most unlikely instruments. God's enemies themselves cooperate in bringing about the divine purposes, and what they do to oppose them only helps to further their accomplishment. God delights in working with nothing and draws from it the most impressive results. God can make use of men and women of all ages and social ranks. God can use anyone—infirm, feebleminded, abandoned by all—and produce through such a person 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 Monsieur Nyel, without ever suspecting it, should have given rise to the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools and that De La Salle, without wishing to do so, became its father. Here is the occasion used by Divine Providence for that purpose.

Madame de Croyères was a childless widow, wealthy and pious. She wished to found a school for boys in her own parish of Saint Jacques. Nyel learned of the woman'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 formal foundation. 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 Reims, where he had come to found a school.

Finally, to secure the woman's complete trust, Nyel mentioned that he had the honor to be acquainted with De La Salle and named

him as the promoter and protector of his work in Reims. 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, 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 parish of Saint Jacques would appeal to his zeal as much as the one in the parish of Saint Maurice 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 kinds 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 year—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.

Madame de Croyère's 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 Reims and after he left, to the local superior of the Brothers. In this way, the heirs of Madame

de Croyères, to whom she had made known her desires, made it a duty to carry them out.

## Opening of the school in the parish of Saint Jacques

Thus the school in the Saint Jacques parish was opened without opposition in September of that same year, 1679. 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. Since he found it difficult to feed them for 50 écus each,[24] he requested 200 livres a year for each one, their lodging being extra. De La Salle agreed to be responsible for this supplementary sum as well as for the cost of their lodging. 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.

Although gifted with real piety, Nyel was not a man to assume responsibility for a Community. His coming and going, the projects he devised, and the visits he made kept him away too much and did not allow him to watch over his own house or 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 making them excellent ones. His superficial way of acting led to serious trouble. He was nearly always out of the house; as a result of his absences, the teachers became careless, and the students grew 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; this grace grew within him day by day, almost in spite of himself, for he still had no intention whatever of taking

24. An écu was the equivalent of three livres.

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."

## De La Salle earns the doctorate and suffers a serious accident

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 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, sustained his theses, and fulfilled all the other requirements usual in the Reims 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 extremely 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 he struggled for a long time and vainly made a supreme effort to get out of the ditch, it seemed he could 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 in drawing him out of this abyss, without a visible miracle, 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 to God. The event gave him matter for profound meditation on the protection of God which he had enjoyed and new motives for serving God 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 were 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; this is a sign that the hand of the Most High supports it and that it is God's 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, we 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 what he was involved in. He thought he was only lending a hand. As he became more deeply involved, his entire being revolted at the thought of the project 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 human heart 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. People called him ambitious, 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 brought him into contact with Nyel and his companion. He did not know where God was leading him when God 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 by those whom he consulted and whom he listened to as oracles of the Holy Spirit.

## De La Salle's repugnance for associating with the teachers

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 declares in the memoir mentioned previously, "by these two events, namely by my meeting Monsieur Nyel and by the proposal made to me by this woman, that I began to take an interest in the schools for boys. Prior to this, I had never given them a thought. The suggestion, of course, had been made to me before. Several of Monsieur Roland's friends had tried to motivate me to accept, 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. In fact, I experienced a great deal of unpleasantness when I first had them come to my house. This lasted for 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. God 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 already established, however, was growing in De La Salle in proportion as he became more involved. 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 schools already opened but likewise indicated to him the proper way to correct them. As we have said, one source of the trouble was the man who had promoted the entire undertaking. Nyel, while capable of founding a school, scarcely knew how to direct the teachers. He did not give adequate attention to what was going on in the house, and he did not insist enough on maintaining a schedule. He was not concerned to give the others an example of what was needed by way of domestic order, family spirit, manner of speaking, and an ordered life.

This was the primary source of the disorder. De La Salle could do little to correct it unless he was closer to the Brothers. It was necessary for him either 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 direct 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 home, 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 that of De La

Salle at Christmas 1679. The dedicated canon urged them to live a more orderly life and prescribed some regulations for them to observe.

Although 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 manner of living of the teachers; Nyel dreamed only of opening new schools. The former, by having the teachers 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 there a third school. When it opened, this new school soon became better disciplined and enrolled more pupils than either of the other two.

## He introduces regulations for the teachers

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 only a few points, simply showed how unsystematic the teachers remained in many other respects. Rising and retiring, interior 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, was preoccupied elsewhere. He made it his principal duty to be devoted to the 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. He was almost never where he should have always been 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 house. 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 govern a community of six men?

At any rate, De La Salle had plenty of time to think the matter over, for he had rented the house close 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 teachers 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, to lodge them under the same roof, to associate with them, and to start living a common life with them created an arrangement that promised many difficulties. Nature grew alarmed over it, and within himself, De La Salle felt a 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 both of his colleagues in the cathedral chapter and of his relatives and friends.

The more he reflected, the less De La Salle felt able to come to a decision. It soon 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 before acting. But whom could he consult on such a delicate matter? Was there in Reims 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 an angry family and from an entire city up in arms?

## He consults Père Barré

Père 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. 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 Monsieur 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 teachers, 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 them into his home and 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.

## A difficult decision

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 De La Salle 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

distress 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—all put his sensitivity 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 who belonged to a distinguished family and was a good brother and 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. There would follow a harvest of suffering and crosses to be borne by his family, who would be shocked and irritated by mixing together people of such divergent backgrounds. His relatives would not fail to consider it a dishonor and to reproach him with it as a crime.

The devil, who pleads nature's cause, added his voice to these clamors. What! the devil suggested to him, can you really want to lodge these peasants in your home and live with such scum?[25] 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.

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,

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25. In French *canaille*, the strongest insult a writer like Blain could have used.

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 Reims, 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 coming and going 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. Furthermore, 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. De La Salle simply 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 have agreed that by founding a school at Guise, he would destroy the ones he had established in Reims, since he had nobody there to carry on what he had started. Common sense itself spoke through the mouth of De La Salle, 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 converge 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 toward the whole business. On the contrary, it was this circumstance that began to attach him to it more closely than ever and to involve him more directly 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 De La Salle closer and substituted him—the man destined to be the Founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools—for the man who, as regards that project, was simply an outsider.

## CHAPTER X

*Beginnings of life in common 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 perhaps have drawn back 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 interior prayer, they heard Mass at six o'clock; then they came to his house, which was close to theirs. They remained with him until the time for night prayer, 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 set times. Thus the presence of the schoolmasters did not call for any great changes in the daily routine.

At this point, the meals were served in the dining room, with individual portions for each, and a specific time was assigned for each action of the day. De La Salle took advantage of Nyel's absence, which lasted a 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 Superior, who had not watched over them closely enough.

What he saw convinced the canon 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 one 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 goodwill 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 ever since they had begun living in an orderly fashion and once obedience, by controlling their actions, also controlled 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 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 these circumstances, De La Salle had to study both the teachers' reactions to their new manner of living and those of his own brothers to these strangers, not to mention the repercussions in the public and among his relatives concerning this new Society.

Although he did not intend to let his family dictate to him, he did not want 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, as far 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 teachers, it would have been useless to try to bind them by rules and obedience as long as their hearts did not consent thereto. Virtue is the result of grace and the cooperation of the human will. Unless the will 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 involved and prepare them for what he planned to do. As he had not found any insurmountable opposition to his initial 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 while he was away. 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.

## De La Salle lodges the teachers in his home

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, 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 to live the regular type of life they had begun. During this period, the canon had been closely observing them and saw, on the one hand, that the schoolmasters 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 De La Salle 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,[26] his patron, 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 family of the canon. De La Salle 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, closely observing his course of action and shocked by this latest 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

26. The feast of Saint John the Baptist, 24 June, and Christmas Eve, 24 December, were the traditional dates in France for initiating and terminating leases.

natural malignity suggested. The canon was called 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, and there were as many different sentences handed down as there were judges. But however diverse these verdicts were, in one respect they all agreed: De La Salle 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 piety 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 of him; the most moderate contented themselves with admiring his zeal without venturing to judge him.

As for his relatives, the wisest among them 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 irritation by caustic invectives. They accused him of staining the honor of the family and of blotting the escutcheon by associating with people of such low standing. They said that he was not living up to his blood and that he besmirched it by having these strangers sit at his table. They declared 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 so unsuited to 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, he made use only of silence and patience to defend himself. He let everyone say his piece, paid no attention, and went ahead with his plans. Although undecided and hesitant for so long, he had come to realize in his serious reflections what the decision that God had inspired 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, crosscurrents, and storms which evil tongues had stirred up against him, they ultimately 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 relatives send away two of his younger brothers

These three young fellows 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 Monsieur de La Salle, was a sincerely pious lad who willingly conformed to the same rules as the teachers, as far as his studies permitted. Seeing this, the relatives became angry and disdainful, and they resolved to withdraw the three brothers from the house. It was in vain that they tried to separate from Monsieur de La Salle the oldest of the three; his affection and devotion could not be overcome. It was different with the next lad. He listened to what his passionate brother-in-law told him and adopted his 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 that of his brother-in-law. His departure was soon followed by that of the youngest boy. At first, his relatives begged De La Salle to give his consent. When he refused, they had a meeting and decided to send the boy to Senlis in charge of the Canons Regular.

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 and the remonstrances of his own family. God was, however, directing all these events in view of the fulfillment of his designs. The relatives thought only of embarrassing De La Salle and of providing what they considered a better upbringing for his brothers. But God, by emptying the house, planned to afford his servant 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, De La Salle seized the opportunity to leave his own home and to withdraw with the teachers 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 property of the Brothers in

1700, when De La Salle bought it with the money provided by three charitable persons. The Brothers of Reims 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 soon see.

In this new locale, De La Salle felt himself perfectly free, and he 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 internally 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 at stated times during the year.

## De La Salle agrees to be the confessor for the teachers

On the basis of this principle, De La Salle tried to encourage all the schoolmasters to go to the same confessor. This they did, choosing the pastor of their parish. Although he was a very fine and capable man, he did not understand community life. Some of them grew disenchanted with him. Another confessor was selected, but they had to go a long distance to get to him and wait in line with the women at his confessional. This waiting sometimes took so long that they returned home only about eight or nine o'clock at night. The inconvenience was serious and needed to be dealt with. The problem could easily be resolved if De La Salle would only consent to hear the confessions of his disciples.

Several of them begged him to do so and even insisted in the hope of persuading him to give in. By 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. De La Salle, 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 make it too hastily. He therefore held off for a long time before giving in to their pressing requests.

Finally their perseverance obliged him to yield. Their good reasons 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 outset entrusted 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. This unified spiritual direction did a great deal of good for them, because they all partook of the spirit of their father. They had the same maxims, the same vision, and the same patterns of thought. 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. 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 these two functions 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, and 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 him, 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 his companions men of solid virtue and piety, he strove solely to bring them to God willingly, to attach them to God 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 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. Most of all, he practiced what he taught, and the shame of not imitating him obliged the least fervent ones to conform to his example.

## The first teachers withdraw; new recruits replace them

It did not take long, however, for him to perceive that several of them 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 that nearby house.

Novelty, which at first is always attractive to some extent, had made them willing to try the new lifestyle during the initial 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, the 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 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 group 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 requisite talent for teaching, a basic piety, and a strong determination to become true disciples of De La Salle.

It was, then, toward the end of 1681 or the beginning of 1682 that the group began shaping up as a true Community. The good Monsieur 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 on moving. His disposition made him as ready to wander from one place to another to establish schools as Saint Paul had been to found new churches.

By then a complete transformation in the work of the schools had taken place: 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. It is not surprising that a vine so thoroughly renewed soon produced its flowers and spread abroad its agreeable fragrance. As we shall see, it soon progressed from the stage in which everyone made fun of it to that in which it acquired so solid a reputation that neighboring cities hastened to invite within their walls the disciples of the saintly canon.

# Chapter XI

*The foundation of Christian and Gratuitous Schools at Rethel, Guise, and Laon; circumstances which lead De La Salle to consider resigning his canonry and then his fortune in order to devote himself entirely to his work.*

The town of Rethel was the first which asked the devout canon for some of his new schoolmasters. 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 hawks or fall to the ground, never to rise again, and 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 lapsing. Because his intentions were pure, he viewed with indifference the multiplication of establishments, unless they could be staffed by men of 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 things, 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.

With this in mind, De La Salle 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 goodwill, but he realized that desire is a long way from performance, that a person's first efforts at acquiring virtue leave him 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.

## Foundation at Rethel

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 de Mazarin[27] so strongly seconded the request of the Rethel authorities, and the zealous pastor besought the Founder so insistently that he had to give in. When he 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, Nyel 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 de 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, and 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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27. The duke's wife, source of the title, was a niece of Cardinal Mazarin. Saint Simon, the contemporary critic, has left an unflattering picture of the duke.

To De La Salle's great surprise, when he returned to visit the duke 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 he refused with a firm 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 with words of praise and testimonials of high esteem for his person. He knew those who were to blame for this failure, but he never reproached them or allowed 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 God's will, he was persuaded that apart from 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 De La Salle 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 the proper 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 small 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 expose his peace of mind to the worries of a lawsuit and to the risk of 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 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 staff 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 devout 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 indeed valued and loved but with which he wanted only to have a free and voluntary connection without 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, De La Salle decided to make a retreat in order 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 his mortifications.

After giving his orders to his household and leaving word at the Community of Sisters entrusted to him by Monsieur Roland, he withdrew into solitude, letting his spirit plunge without distraction into interior 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 to which he yielded 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 De La Salle treated his flesh and to the sacrifices he made for God. There, at the start of a truly new life, he drew up an initial plan for the most sublime perfection he hoped to realize.

## Foundation at Guise

During this time, the founding of the Gratuitous Schools at Rethel made the people of 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 teachers, and Mademoiselle de Guise endowed the Gratuitous Schools which opened that same year, 1682. Others were established in Château-Porcien in July of that year and in 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 was temperamentally incapable of adopting De La Salle's spirit or conforming to his manner of living.

## Foundation at Laon

At this time, Nyel was in Guise, where he had gone after remaining for six months in 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 Saint Martin's Abbey and by the pastor of Saint Pierre, who later became a canon of the cathedral and is still living. This foundation was made in 1683. The pastor took advantage of this opportunity to establish a solid friendship with De La Salle, in whom he felt an unbounded confidence and whose virtue he admired.[28] Nyel opened the school and remained there for two years—a long time for a man of his disposition.

It is not surprising that at the end of this time, Nyel 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 under the care of De La Salle. For this reason, in 1685, he visited the canon in Reims and begged him most earnestly to accept his resignation as head of these schools. The pastor of Saint Pierre 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.

## The teachers express concern about the future

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 tiny way, the devil 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 being made.

The way to succeed in this endeavor was for Satan to tempt the teachers to leave the Community by dangling before their eyes various

28. The pastor was Pierre Guyart, who remained a life-long friend of the Founder. He will be mentioned often in the narrative, notably as a retreatant at Vaugirard and later as the recipient of a letter from Paris describing the difficulties between De La Salle and the diocesan authorities there.

marvelous 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, until it became 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 a man of God filled with zeal could do under such circumstances. 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 schoolmasters, 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 counselor 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 thereby 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 also 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. Oh, the depths of God's judgments! God finds glory only when the divine will is carried out in submission to providential decrees. That is where we must seek it. Although we may be inspired to undertake great works to honor God, still these very often are permitted by Providence to end in difficulties and sometimes in ruin, or at least be on the brink of ruin, so that later on, they can be revived to the greater glory of God. It is God 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 is 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 no care, advice, exhortation, or acts of dedication 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 goodwill come to repopulate 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 others to acquire. This time, he had the consolation of discovering that he was sowing the seed in good earth.

All he had to do was to warn his Brothers 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 anything, give God everything as soon as they are asked.

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 seducer. It was not love of liberty, the tedium of a constraining life, or distaste 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 Founder 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 and 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 Monsieur de La Salle is no longer with us? Such were the questions which 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 in order 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.

## A vain appeal to trust in Providence; the teachers respond

De La Salle sensed that his exhortations on confidence in God and abandonment to Providence were not effective but without knowing exactly the reason. These forthright peasants, strangers to subterfuge, did not leave him very long in the dark. They stated with utter frankness that their unrest was due to a lack of certainty and assurance concerning their status. They reminded him that there was nothing fixed or stable in their situation, that he himself could see that his project was suffering reversals. For their part, it would be a sorry thing for them to sacrifice their young manhood for a clientele that would

forget them, leaving them in their old age without any place to rest from their labors and forced to spend their last years and to end their days in dreary indigence.

In saying these things, they did not say everything. They had another reply to all the exhortations made by their Superior about abandonment to Providence. But they did not yet dare to articulate it, out of embarrassment and respect. Although there was truth in it, it would be impolite, and they feared to offend a man who had done so much good for them and who gave them no grounds for complaint. But these 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 a few days. 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 compact more reliable, because God has signed it with blood and has affixed to it the seal of infallible truth. Why then do you grow distrustful? If the positive promises of God cannot calm your uneasiness and your concern for the future, what is the point of looking for an investment 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 made them beautiful. 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 even to the grass that dries out and serves as fuel for the fire, how can you believe, you 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 the Lord's infinite goodness, and honor God by leaving in the divine 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 words so full of truth 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 of a rich prebend and his own family fortune, he enjoyed a secure refuge against indigence, and so 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 he 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 devout 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 situation, so well provided for, 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 was speaking 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 expressing their grievance and gave De La Salle one of those blunt, direct replies that the heart feels is unanswerable: "You speak with inspiration amidst your ease, 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 reproach of the schoolmasters was indeed ungracious, but he paid no attention to their manner and 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 words 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; they 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 which was 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 the tempter. 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 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 to renounce his personal wealth in order to attach himself to Jesus Christ naked on the cross.

## Chapter XII

*De La Salle deliberates whether or not to resign his canonry; the reasons which lead him to this generous resolution; he makes his decision but does not 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 profoundly 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.

### De La Salle consults Père Barré

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 away.*

Give it away to whom? To our relatives? If they needed it, charity rightly understood would make this a duty, for charity requires order, and order gives first place among the poor to our needy relatives. Duly ordered charity would begin by distributing to our family the wealth renounced through a desire for perfection. But if relatives are well-to-do, must we give them the sums raised by the sale of our goods, as the Gospel advises? No. Such giving would only burden 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 original 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, 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 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.

Therefore, De La Salle's first thought was to divest himself of his patrimonial goods but 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 resolutions and led him to begin by resigning his canonry.

Père Barré was the instrument that the Holy Spirit employed to second by his counsels the sacred inspirations given the canon. This saintly Minim was the person who had previously established Christian and Gratuitous Schools. It was only natural 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 Barré wanted the 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 Barré commented on those 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 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 the 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 nothing else on which to rely."

Barré was not a man to tell the truth by halves. Speaking to De La Salle, he advised that having given away his patrimonial goods, 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 interiorly by whispering to his heart the same advice that the saintly Minim was giving 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 regular spiritual director.[29] 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 Père Barré, thought carefully about what he should do. He brought his reflections and considerations to the foot of the crucifix, asking God for his light and offering himself to God 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 reasons that motivated De La Salle to resign his canonry

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 speak the language of perfection, as I once did 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 its source will continue to be there. 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 concerns 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 dependable staff of teachers, the schools will fail. In this case, the heirs of the foundations will claim the funds contributed for their maintenance.

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29. Most probably, this was Jacques Callou, vicar-general and superior of the diocesan seminary.

"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 him from rendering other services to the Church or from devoting himself to the salvation of souls. He can divide his 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 the function of Superior properly, I will have to omit all the duties of a canon, 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 should tip the balance? The greater glory of God, the fuller service of the Church, my own higher perfection, and the salvation of souls: these 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 it up. 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 toward which he is leading me by the hand?"

To tell the entire truth, De La Salle considered the function of canon 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 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 ministry and dedicated to cultivation of the Lord's vineyard under the eyes of the bishop and at his direction. At the very least, we must admit that only those who lack either the necessary talents or the consent of the bishop are dispensed from active ministry.

De La Salle sensed that his zeal was hemmed in by the demands 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 from his house often and for lengthy periods, yet his presence in the house was most necessary. His director did not wish to see his disciple, so long as he remained a good canon, neglect his duty as a vigilant Superior of his Community, but as we shall soon see, he strongly opposed 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 would not question the guidance that was given him, tried his best to combine these two duties and to fulfill the obligations arising from

them. He was present in the choir, as far as his duties permitted: namely, 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 he wished to devote to an even more divine function. This longing had remained with him ever since M. Roland had suggested that he exchange his canonry for a parish, and it had not been extinguished by the fact that to obey his archbishop, he 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 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 the divine designs in a gradual and natural manner. By the mysterious operation of grace, the desires of this man of God were brought into line with the divine will. I think that at this point, De La Salle was like a man who has stopped at a spot where various paths diverge. Uncertain as to which he should choose, he deliberates, consults, informs himself as to the way 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 or 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 much prayer and consultation, it seemed evident to him, *toward the end of the year 1682*, as he himself writes, *that God was calling him to take charge of the schools, and 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, its true motive, and determining whether it was the hasty result of a passing excess of fervor or the mature fruit of grace and the action of the Holy Spirit.

We all need to test our motives and 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 when De La Salle renounced his canonry and ended when he gave up his wealth, at first glance seemed arrogant. In the eyes of human reason, the decision was a startling one.

A wise spiritual director, who does not seek his responses 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 this decision. 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 but that he should wait until God's will made itself clear. A resolution which would amount to condemning oneself to the severest poverty, in order to launch a work whose success was still so uncertain and whose plan 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 had inspired it, but it would have been vain and rash if any other motive had been involved. 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 founder?

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-starred 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 his project were to fail, to what would he be reduced? 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, a 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 by setting a price on the lessons he would have tried in vain to make gratuitous and completely 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 Monsieur 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 instruction?

All these tasks he had already managed to combine with his duties as a canon. Since his vocation was not in doubt 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?

## Opposition from his director, who finally yields

All these considerations were weighty and justified his director in making De La Salle put off carrying out 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.

Furthermore, 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 the older brother did not leave his canonry to this deserving young man, 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, once again, it would certainly not be 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, and 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 him while others opposed the resolution he had formed of resigning his canonry.

On his return, he gave his director a detailed account of his consultations. These interviews only added to De La Salle's irresolution, because his director, seeing that his own opinion was shared by several of the enlightened priests who had been consulted, grew all the more convinced of the rightness of his 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 that priest'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 with great clarity to the director the impossibility of reconciling the two functions that had the devout canon split in two. The director finally gave in to these arguments and to his penitent's desires, but only after long and serious examination.

I have almost forgotten to state that of all those whose advice De La Salle had sought, it was Père Barré who most strongly backed him in his resolve to renounce his canonry and give up his patrimony so that he might abandon himself exclusively to God's Providence, as he was urging those to do to whom he was affording such perfect lessons on this subject. Père 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 devout canon. We cannot too highly respect the admirable docility of the truly lofty soul of De La Salle, ever ready for total sacrifice. Without reasoning, without arguing, without objecting, he heeded the oracles which the Holy Spirit supplied him by the mouth of the holy religious, and he submitted respectfully.

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! This canon cared for nothing; nothing could stop him, neither his wealth

nor the amenities of a comfortable life. He laid it all down with the promptness with which we 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 to the desire to make a name for himself in the world? Such a motive is what unfair and prejudiced censors taxed him with at the time. If they had been willing to look into their hearts and to study their inclinations, they would have found 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

*The steps De La Salle takes to resign his canonry, once his director agrees; the opposition he encounters and overcomes.*

Our devout canon, convinced that secrecy is the key to success in anyone's undertakings, neglected none of the precautions that prudence suggested in order to keep his project quiet. 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 secret which its soul cannot keep to itself.

### Worldly people discuss his proposal

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 family of Monsieur de La Salle. A "sign of contradiction" like his Divine Master, on this occasion he had to experience reproaches, rash judgments, and mockery from all sorts of people. Worldly persons

concluded that he had lost his mind and had exhausted his psychic resistance by leading too retired a life and by his exaggeratedly mortified and unsocial behavior. They believed that his mind was enfeebled, that he wanted to raise himself up to unprecedented heights and launch 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 of the politically minded, who claim to see into and to probe men's character 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 led him to carry everything to the extreme. The irreligious, who easily find ways to pour scorn on everything and who love nothing better than to mock the devout, said that De La Salle, who was sanguine and impetuous by nature, was bored with staying quietly in a state of life in which he was happy in 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 appeal of an extraordinary lifestyle; 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 compliant 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. They omitted nothing in recounting details of the troubles, suffering, and contradictions he would have to face in the 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 theirs and with them for the rest of his life.

Other friends, like those of Job, questioned him. 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 it, 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 a 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. What, 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 silence people 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 schoolteacher, when he places himself at the head of a band of beggars and becomes a tramp 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 we must be wise with sobriety and tailor our undertakings to fit our strength.

What could our compatriot be running after? others asked. Some sort of chimerical perfection? I thought he had more sense. He is letting himself be led astray by pious illusions. Just what is this work he is trying to start, if not pure delusion?. How surprised and embarrassed will he not be, when he finally sees all his dreams fade into

nothingness! Can any other result be expected? Suppose that he does succeed in getting this plan 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?

## De La Salle lets the worldly talk go on but keeps silent

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, the one authorized by the example of Jesus Christ himself. *Jesus remained silent*; *Jesus did not open his mouth* 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 initial 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 the merit it wins.

This glorious silence was the only defense that De La Salle resorted to. I do not know if 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 human being. In fact, we can say that the saints are more human than the rest of us, in this sense. 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 their sacrifices 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 made his choice. 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, the Spirit rendered him victorious over them.

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 humans 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 pictures of the wretched state into which he was about to hurl himself, pictures 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 about to embrace that it seemed to him that by entering it, he would be condemning himself, until death, to all the tortures of the damned and all the most terrible consequences of the direst penury.

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, that an exaggerated sense of duty had led to imitate him. 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, extreme heat and cold, ragged clothing, rejection, insults, infirmities and illnesses, and the endless cortege of misery and suffering—all these consequences of poverty would be his lot after he had renounced his parental inheritance and his ecclesiastical income.

In addition, if he alone remained poor and miserable, he alone would suffer, but he would have to endure everything, 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 and 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. The father of lies, Satan, sought to convince him that after all, he would be the only one worthy of compassion, for the state which he was about to embrace was the natural lot of those whom he wished to emulate. Born poor and having always lived in that condition, if in the teaching profession they remain poor, 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 sizable patrimony 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 deeply 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.

What will our canon do now in his agitation, trouble, and uncertainty? Will he draw back? Will he dare to go ahead toward 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 the altar, well provided for, thanks to income from the Church and his own patrimony! Such a heroic determination, so contrary to self-love and to 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.

## He goes to Paris to get the approval of his archbishop

Finally resolved to divest himself of everything in order 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 Reims.

During his brief sojourn in Paris, our virtuous canon met with Monsieur de La Barmondière, at the time 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 the fact 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. De La Barmondière, delighted to hear of the remarkable results that the new schools were achieving in Reims, hastened to request for his vast parish such a valuable asset, and he 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 this plan took longer than anyone expected. To De La Salle's great regret, he was only able to keep his promise six years later. Yet, in this way and under the aegis of this saintly parish priest, God was preparing 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 schools might spread to all the other cities of France.

The virtuous canon was thus obliged to go back home 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 his ardor and change his dispositions and that his own remonstrances, joined with those of relatives and friends, would make him give up this project which aroused so much antagonism on all sides.

Fundamentally, Archbishop Le Tellier felt great esteem for the young canon whose merit and virtue he had occasion to observe. He feared—not without reason—that the loss of this man to the cathedral might soon be followed by losing him to the 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 him 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.

## The archbishop tries to dissuade him but finally agrees

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 discuss. 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 grieve him. After 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 likes of whom was not to be found in the diocese of Reims.

He showed the same attitude a few years later, when the servant of God wanted to leave Reims 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 toward the virtuous canon. He might have been accused of showing himself rather harsh, if the purpose he pursued was not made clear.

The archbishop had refused to see the virtuous canon only because of the genuine esteem he entertained for him and through fear of losing him. By refusing him an opportunity of explaining his design, he wanted to lead him to give it up. He might have succeeded, if De La Salle's plan had not been inspired by God. It is well known that delay and accumulated opposition end up by making people 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 M. Philbert, a man on whom Archbishop Le Tellier relied a great deal, 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 school supervisor at the cathedral. Marvelous to relate, when the group heard De La Salle and considered his arguments, all of them agreed with 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.

It is true that undertakings inspired by God simply grow stronger through opposition. The plans of the Almighty cannot be foiled by schemes and opposition, as Gamaliel told the Jews. When God acts, everything else must yield, and everything must contribute to what he wishes to bring about. God sways the thoughts and wills of creatures and makes all speak the divine language, every tongue proclaiming what has been 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 not with words which came from his own spirit but 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 human opposition 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 M. Le Tellier was to leave again for Paris.

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 no doors, no barriers, no 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 the divine will, and beseeching God to carry them out without taking into consideration his own inclination or repugnance. 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 Monsieur de La Salle; he is losing his mind. You are right*, replied the other, wiser than the first. *He is indeed losing the mind of the world but filling himself with the mind of God.*

It would seem that during this long prayer, God once again whispered to the heart of the canon what the advisors had been inspired to recommend, and the Holy Spirit urged him to go back to the archbishop and once more ask for his 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 he would decide, only awaited his orders to execute them, opened his heart to him with simplicity and straightforwardness.

After giving a complete and precise report on all he had done, he proposed both plans: to resign his canonry and to go 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 Monsieur Philbert, the former superior of the Reims seminary. Philbert, a canon, was at that very time in choir, and the archbishop sent for him. He 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 answered neither yes nor no, but he adroitly evaded the question by saying, *Monsieur de La Salle has a brother to whom he could give his prebend. He can give it to anyone he likes*, replied the prelate; *I will accept his resignation.*

## Le Tellier's surprise at the choice of a successor

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 Monsieur Faubert as his successor. This was a young ecclesiastic who enjoyed a notable reputation in Reims 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 more distinguished in merit or more worthy of his choice. Faubert, however, was poor and of humble extraction, and for this reason, he 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 who was already a cleric and eligible to replace him. But here was a man who, in a manner worthy of apostolic times and like Saint Paul, never heeded flesh and blood, who 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 authorized by many examples. He was obliged to surmount human respect, the interests of his family, and the outcries of the public. 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 palace of the archbishop 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 people, all he had to do was to designate his brother as his successor or pick somebody else from among the wealthy and distinguished citizens of Reims. 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, such arguments which are so powerful over persons who act through human motives, found no entry into the mind of this priest, who listened to nothing but the Spirit of God.

## Le Tellier tries in vain to dissuade De La Salle from his choice

The surprise the archbishop showed when he learned that the devout canon had 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 Reims 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 in the least and did not make him modify his first 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 him give the preference to his brother rather than to a total stranger. His entreaty was a strong one, especially in the presence of someone who looked upon his superiors only with the eyes of faith but who 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, De La Salle 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 left the canon to his holy freedom of choice.

His brother, as it turned out, did not lose anything by this arrangement, because the refusal of De La Salle to pass on his canonry

to him secured for his brother another one which the same prelate conferred of his own free will, without even being asked to do so, as though to compensate for the supposed loss he had suffered by the resignation in favor of Monsieur 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 offering you this gift to make reparation for the foolishness of Monsieur de La Salle, who gave his benefice to someone other than his own brother.*

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—was eager, once he became a wealthy canon, to enjoy like others an effortless life with ample repose, and he 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 Faubert might become later on but on what he was at the time. When De La Salle chose him as his successor, this young ecclesiastic of the diocese of Reims was the man in the diocese who seemed to be doing the greatest good and who showed the most promise for the future. If eventually 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 his footsteps, joined forces with him, and started a sort of junior seminary for young ecclesiastical students at the same time and in the same house where De La Salle began a similar program for the Brothers.

## De La Salle's anguish at Faubert's loss of fervor

In all probability, as long as the servant of God remained in Reims, Faubert profited by his presence. He did not begin to grow relaxed until he lost the support of De La Salle's instruction 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 when he died, it took eight or ten men to carry his coffin. His death preceded by several years that of De La Salle, who experienced the chagrin of seeing his successor in

the chapter of Reims 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 Monsieur Faubert from among the parish priests, where 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.

It is remarkable 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, while 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. 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 locations as the chronological order would require, the story would have lost some of its interest and utility. So now let us return 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 look with admiration on 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 patrimonial goods to endow the schools and the income from 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 someone to wish to become poor after being rich, by his own free choice to move from enjoying all the amenities of life to a state in which even the necessities would be lacking, was a measure which to this rich and opulent lord seemed a pious illusion, one of those romantic and devotional fantasies more apt to excite hilarity than to be put into effect. In fact, when the canon had first broached

the matter, Le Tellier had laughed heartily. Did he hope 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 the carrying out of this evangelical resolution would begin by putting aside the strongest natural feelings and preferring a poor priest to a beloved brother, he finally realized that there still are in the Church some of those "new men" formed by the Holy Spirit 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 when he had entered it. Upon 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 remains firm in his decision to resign his canonry in favor of Monsieur Faubert, in spite of renewed appeals from his relatives, his colleagues, and his friends.*

The spiritual joy 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 act of resignation, which he had signed and which had won the approval of the archbishop, 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. The resignation 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 devout 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 cathedral chapter than Monsieur Faubert, someone with higher standing at the archdiocesan chancery, someone more favorably regarded by the public and by his family.

What did people not do to make him go 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 brother of the devout canon or, at least, for some other member of the family, and in case none of these would 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 Reims and one of its distinguished families. If all did not agree on the candidates they suggested, they all made it clear that Faubert was the wrong man. The members of the chapter did not consider him worthy to take his seat among them and 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 had neither property nor pedigree.

There ensued a general agitation 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 him and was attached to him, which considered him its glory and a man who spread abroad the good fragrance 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, and that if he had any doubts, it would be easy to convince him by having all of them sign the petition they would present 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 Monsieur Faubert were preferred to his own brother or to one of his other close relatives, 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 remaining where and what he was, that 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 onslaughts, De La Salle remained steadfast in a resolve which had already cost him such great sacrifices and which the Holy Spirit 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 the appeals of his friends 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, and 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 objections of the canons against Monsieur Faubert

The final efforts came from the chapter. That illustrious body, displeased at losing De La Salle, was even more so at seeing him replaced by Monsieur 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 Faubert was and how much it distressed them. They went on to give His Excellency to understand how ardently they desired to see one brother succeed to the other, thus excluding a man whose appointment they considered a disgrace for their whole company. The expedient they suggested to the prelate to obtain their aim was short and facile.

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 colleagues, he tried once more either to keep him in his place at the cathedral or to persuade him to give his place to his brother.

Monsieur Callou, the vicar-general and at this time superior of the seminary of Reims, was the man the archbishop thought to be 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 personal interest nor emotion seemed to be the reason for it. Family and friends seemed no longer to be involved. 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 the archbishop, his first superior—recommendations brought to him by the most influential cleric in the diocese, a man who enjoyed the highest reputation for virtue and sound doctrine.

## Vain attempts by the vicar-general to convince De La Salle to withdraw his resignation

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 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 said that he had

come on behalf of the archbishop to beg him to yield. He assured him that the desire of His Excellency was to see him back in the cathedral or at least to see him bestow the canonry on his brother. He could not, without causing his family some injury, hand over this dignity to someone who was neither his closest relative nor his heir; finally, since his own brother was both capable and virtuous, it would be a slur on him if a stranger were preferred to him.

Although 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, spoke to him in the secret of his heart and confirmed 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 give 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 re-echo it?"

Such an answer reduced the superior of the Reims 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 the 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 to do. This advice, which is the contrary of what I came to tell you, is truly from God and the only suggestion you must listen to.* He ended by encouraging him to pursue his plan, another demonstration of how the Holy Spirit puts words into the mouth of anyone and causes even those tongues which were prepared to speak against the divine will now to declare it.

## Monsieur Faubert takes possession of De La Salle's canonry

Monsieur 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 he 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 the delay availed nothing, the archbishop issued the letters of approval for Faubert, who took possession of his canonry on 16 August 1683. De La Salle alone rejoiced over it. *Having emerged triumphant from the arduous contest which God had given him to endure,*[30] he was thus, at the age of thirty-three, relieved of a rich and honorable burden. He experienced more satisfaction over his resignation than others feel over accepting such positions after having for a long time desired and avidly sought them. He still possessed his patrimonial goods, but it would not take him long to give them up also, desirous as he was to make himself perfectly conformable to the One who, being infinitely rich, made himself poor for our sakes, eager to become in all things like unto his 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 whom God has fully taken possession of and occupied 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, and a state which condemns them to pain, toil, and abjection are what they aspire to. Such souls 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 people 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 greatest menace to the world and the flesh. 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 in speaking to hearts, God uses language very different from that of human beings. 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 patrimony, soon poorer than those

30. Wisdom 10.

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, and 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 own 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 reasons why De La Salle considers moving to Paris

The first thought that occurred to him after resigning his canonry was to proceed to Paris. M. Philbert had advised him to do this. He had practically promised M. de La Barmondière to come. Père 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.

Monsieur Philbert felt that this change of locale was necessary: first, to quiet the emotions, gossip, and dissatisfaction stirred up in Reims by the example of such virtue; second, to mollify the De La Salle family, irritated over the conduct of a relative who had shown so little concern about its honor and its interests; third, to give the chapter time to put aside 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 perfection it could not understand and against which so many had taken umbrage, depending on their own interests or the various passions which possessed them.

Monsieur de La Barmondière wished to see De La Salle come to Paris mainly for the good of his parish. He envied the city of Reims this treasure it possessed without realizing it. Père 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 Reims, where it remained as though hidden under a basket, and 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's mind was duly impressed by them. It was indeed time for him to withdraw from the sight of his fellow citizens. Some were poorly disposed toward him; 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.

Nevertheless, 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 their 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 former 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, De La Salle 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 school in that parish, which was almost as large as a diocese. In fact, he was as anxious to satisfy the zeal of Père Barré as he was to give fuller scope to his own zeal 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 Reims was like a prison where he remained confined; 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 calling him to Paris, even making 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, and he will not move until obedience sends him. All these arguments in favor of going were weighty, and all 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 commands him: do this. *I say to someone, go, and he goes; come, and he comes; do this, and he does it.* If his director did not add these orders to all the reasons given, they would have no impact on the Founder's mind.

De La Salle believed Monsieur Philbert to be a prudent counselor; the arguments he put forward seemed well founded and decisive. He considered Monsieur de La Barmondière and Père 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 childlike docility.

He often consulted enlightened persons, eminent for their virtue, but he did not adopt their advice unless his director approved it. In all things, he abided by his 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 his spiritual director 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 we cannot have blind confidence in our spiritual director, we should leave him. However, when after prayer we have made a judicious choice of a director, when freed from natural inclinations and worldly prejudices and the tendencies of our own heart, we find a director whose lively, pure faith seeks nothing but Jesus Christ and listens only to him, we must feel certain that we will hear God's voice from his mouth and must take his advice as our rule of life. De La Salle gives us a marvelous example of such docility.

He would have preferred to leave Reims and move to Paris; the advice of M. Philbert authorized him to do so. He had pledged his word to M. de La Barmondière, and the wishes of Père Barré drew him thither. He told all this to his spiritual 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 spiritual director advises against the move

His spiritual director's opinion ran counter to the opinions of Philbert, De La Barmondière, and Barré, and it was the only one which was followed, and rightly so. If we consider his director's reasons and compare them with those given above, we shall see that the director's position was indeed to be preferred. "Your new Institute is just starting," he said to De La Salle. "It is still in gestation, and it may be that it will not survive the move to Paris to be born. Nature itself requires that it should develop in the place where it was conceived before appearing in the light of day. You 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 Reims. Before moving it to Paris, give it time to acquire consistency, to develop sufficiently in the place where it was born.

"If you want another comparison, consider this. When you wish to erect a building, you 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 Reims. It would take a miracle to prevent it from falling to pieces.

"You are perfectly right to call your little group a tiny flock. You have about fifteen men here, in Laon, in Guise, and in Rethel. 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 Reims. While taking care of some, you will be neglecting others.

"Just as your presence will do them much good wherever you are, 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 lose their way on a road where it is so easy to be misled."

In this way, his director made De La Salle realize how necessary his presence was in Reims by representing to him the harm that going

to Paris would do to his little Community, yet only half organized. He reminded him of the disappointments and worries he 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 his penitent's zealous desire to keep his word. "Such a promise, however," he observed, "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 Reims by trying to establish yourself in Paris." Such reasons were too cogent to be rejected. It was not, however, their cogency that made De La Salle remain in Reims 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 spiritual guide, which De La Salle did not allow himself to call into question, put an end to his reflections and inner debate. He wrote to 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 the divine designs. He also wrote to Monsieur Lespagnol, who had charge of the parish schools at Saint Sulpice, saying that he had been advised not to leave Reims and that it was not possible for him to go to Paris yet.

When Père 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, Barré 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 because 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 much

less religious spirit and less inclination toward piety or 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. 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. Because 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, Reims 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 him move to Paris, 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 Père Barré, by his authority and the cogency of his arguments, by the renown of his sanctity, and by 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 spiritual director had not kept him in Reims.

## Chapter XV

*With the approval of his spiritual director, De La Salle sells his patrimonial goods 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 God's instrument. Such instruments, however, must be fit for God's hands: men and women who are dead to themselves, who renounce their own views and live only according to God's, who act only as God gives them to act. De La Salle sought to achieve this state of perfect death to self. He tried in

every way to become truly God's man, capable of doing God's work. He directed his undivided application to his own sanctification and that of his disciples; he desired these goals to the exclusion of all else.

To walk with giant strides in the path of perfection, however, we must not be attached to anything. We must be detached from everything and filled with heroic courage to follow Jesus 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.

Although he no longer possessed an ecclesiastical benefice, De La Salle still owned his patrimonial goods. He felt that he possessed too much and that the time had come at last 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 poor in fact.

Renunciation is the first step leading to perfection. If we wish to follow Christ, we must run after him. But to run, we must carry no heavy burden, nothing to impede or weigh us down. The slightest excess would retard and eventually stop us. Since the burden of wealth is a grievous one, it is necessary to despoil ourselves 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 all you have, give it to the poor*, and when you have done that, *come, follow me*. He says that this selling and this giving away must precede the act of coming and following him. Voluntary poverty, which gives us wings to follow Christ, strongly attracted De La Salle. Drawn by its beauty, he wanted to espouse poverty, 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 the hearts of the Brothers as long as solicitude for the

present and anxiety for the future preoccupied them. This temptation affected all of them and incited them to leave a house which offered no assurance for the future, in order to seek it elsewhere, mostly in vain 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 surely 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 to give them such an example in his person in order to confirm them in their vocation and inspire them with a yearning for perfection.

Ultimately, his entire work was a work of Providence. Père 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.[31] 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 him realize that when his disciples saw him as poor by choice as they were by 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.

## De La Salle consults his director about his plan

These three considerations urged him, therefore, to divest himself of his patrimonial goods. 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. However, De La Salle had already done so many unconventional things that by this time, people should have lost the habit of wondering

31. Barré called the congregation he founded "Sisters of Providence."

about his conduct. Anything could be expected from a man of his character. The world itself, 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. 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 his canonry, it seemed to the director that he should consent to it more readily than he had to the former renunciation.

The fact is, however, that this new decision presented many more difficulties than did 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 the family usually prevents such projects from being executed. Why then did the world, which is 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 those of the entire city, De La Salle planned to sell his possessions and distribute the proceeds to the poor, than it did 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; indeed, it is remarkable. 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, to the detriment of his relatives? We 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 clearly showed that it was 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. His relatives, equally reticent 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 assist 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 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 of whom he was especially in charge. 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, his schoolteachers were certainly poor. Indeed, 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 would be 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 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.

## Balancing the options for the use of his wealth

Furthermore, his work needed support. When urgent necessities arose, they 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 cause them embarrassment and even possible financial loss. 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 needs 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 teachers, 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 was recommended by the example of Monsieur Roland and had the approval of several persons distinguished by their piety.

"Since you have made up your mind to divest yourself of your wealth," he was told, "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; if it is to subsist, it needs your money as much as it needs your direction. 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 that you are right in using it to consolidate your good works. The example of Monsieur 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 your schools for boys?" 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.

On the other hand, the ideal of total abandonment to Providence had remained deeply embedded in his mind ever since Père 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. This was the maxim of the saintly Minim: *Endowed schools will founder*,[32] 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 most perfect in theory is often open to resounding failure and dangerous illusions and is not always the surest course to follow in practice.

## After prayer, he decides to give his wealth to the poor

De La Salle, as usual, was cautious. He 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.

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 the 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

32. In the 1733 edition: *Les Écoles fondées seroient fonduës.*

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 guidance 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 sale 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 sought the approval to do so from his director, who at first was surprised by such a heroic decision and raised some objections in order to prevent its being carried out. Finally, however, 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 visible guide that someone even more skillful than he was directing him in secret and that it was indeed the Holy Spirit who was guiding him. Although convinced that his plan was inspired by heaven, De La Salle 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 after 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 do so.* 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, humility, and 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, from a man who by reason of a basic distrust of self, seeks in his guide 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, grace-favored souls consult their directors with such saintly dispositions that they bring to them the light of the Holy Spirit dwelling within them, the Spirit who communicates 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 guide. These qualities characterize the requests they make of him, show that they are moved by the Holy Spirit, and constitute irrefutable 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 was laid before him. The request he made to sell his goods and distribute them 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 that step except after long and repeated entreaties, consented to this one with little hesitation. How did this happen? No doubt, the Holy Spirit inspired the director by placing the right words on De La Salle's lips and by giving proof to the director that his inspiration was genuine because of the humility, docility, and submissiveness of the person making the request.

## His director gives his consent

In fact, De La Salle 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 Reims into a vast almshouse. The majority of the population had resorted to begging, because both agricultural and manufacturing enterprises had to shut down on account of the severity of the winter and the exorbitant prices of everything. People who were up to then self-supporting converged on the homes of the wealthy, begging bread like the certified poor were accustomed to do without shame. The famine was so widespread and so cruel that even 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. When he was free to distribute it all to the poor, he finally realized what his wealth was truly worth. 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.

## The orderly manner of distribution

He did not, however, distribute his funds haphazardly or 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 offered them only to 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 was 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 aid 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 included 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, prudent reproofs, and marks of the most tender 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. He 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 having become even poorer than those whom he had fed, he in turn sacrificed his self-love and 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.

After eating this bread given as an alms, De La Salle left on foot for Rethel to discuss with the Duke de Mazarin the proposed founding of a seminary for teachers for the villages of the duke's domains. When the two of them came back to Reims 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 idiot.* He meant 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 his resources, which amounted to some 40,000 livres, since the famine 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, *God is everything for me.* If I have lost all for his sake, I find it all again in him. He alone suffices. De La Salle 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 Brothers. 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: 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.

## The reproaches of the Brothers and De La Salle's response

Here was a man who forgot himself in circumstances when all others were thinking only of themselves and forgetting everyone else. Here was a man whose only concern was to feed and relieve the poor and to become poor himself at a time when there seemed to be scarcely one 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 closely and witness his total charity, could not help expressing their surprise to him.

Although two years of famine had gone by and a large number of other people had lacked the necessities of life, De La Salle's 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 disquiet 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 patrimony.

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 God 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 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 and trying to please God.

"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 bread at any 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 God's 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 in bestowing life on all creatures, assumed the task of supplying their needs.

It was on this unshakable foundation that De La Salle began constructing 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 as 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

# The Life of John Baptist de La Salle, Founder of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools

A Biography in Three Books

Book Two

Frontispiece from the 1733 edition of Blain's *Life*, an engraving by Jean-Baptiste Scotin of a painting by Pierre Léger which is now lost. (Émile Rousset, *J. B. de La Salle; Iconographie*, Boulogne: Limet, 1979, plate 9.)

# The Life of John Baptist de La Salle, Founder of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools

## A Biography in Three Books

Book Two

Jean-Baptiste Blain
Translated by Richard Arnandez, FSC
Edited by Luke Salm, FSC

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The editor is pleased
to dedicate this revised translation
to Augustine Loes, FSC,
in gratitude for
a life-long association,
crowned in the Buttimer Institute
and Lasallian Publications
by a collaborative search
for the mind and heart of
John Baptist de La Salle

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# Book Two

# LA VIE
## DE MONSIEUR
# JEAN-BAPTISTE
# DE LA SALLE,
## INSTITUTEUR
## DES FRERES DES ECOLES
## CHRE'TIENNES.

## LIVRE SECOND,

*Où Monſieur* DE LA SALLE *eſt repreſenté comme l'Inſtituteur d'une Societé nouvelle, très-utile & très-néceſſaire à l'Egliſe.*

NOUS n'avons juſqu'à preſent regardé Monſieur De La Salle que comme un Particulier ſur lequel le Ciel avoit de grands deſſeins, & qu'il préparoit par des graces choiſies, & par la pratique des vertus les plus éminentes, à devenir l'inſtrument d'une œuvre qu'il deſtinoit par ſa miſéricorde à l'inſtruction, à l'éducation, & à la ſanctification de la jeuneſſe la plus pauvre & la plus abandonnée. Maintenant nous l'allons enviſager, en continuant l'hiſtoire de ſa Vie, comme Patriarche à la tête d'un Inſtitut qu'il éleve par l'inſpiration du Sain-Eſprit, qu'il cultive avec ſoin, & qu'il ſoûtient par ſon courage & de continuels exemples de ſainteté. On peut juger de ce qu'il va faire, par ce qu'il a déja fait. D'un homme qui a fait de ſi grands ſacrifices, que peut-on attendre que des prodiges de grace & de vertu ?

### CHAPITRE PREMIER.

*Dieu envoye à M. De La Salle de nouveaux ſujets d'un vrai mérite : Les etranges violences qu'il ſe fait pour s'accoutumer à la nourriture de ſes Diſciples : Juſqu'où il porte en tout le reſte l'eſprit de Retraite, d'Oraiſon, & de Pénitence.*

MOnſieur De La Salle dégradé, pour ainſi dire, & tombé de ſon rang, pauvre, ſans crédit, ſans amis, n'ayant à preſenter à ceux qui vouloient le ſuivre, que la Croix de Jeſus-Chriſt, n'avoit auſſi à leur demander à eux-

Title page of Book Two from the original 1733 edition of Blain's *Life*. Cahiers lasalliens 7 (Rome: Maison Saint Jean-Baptiste de La Salle, 1961), p. 223.

# Book Two

*In which Monsieur de La Salle is portrayed as the Founder of a new Society very useful and necessary for the Church.*

Up to now we have considered Monsieur de La Salle as an individual person, one on whom heaven had great designs, whom it prepared by choice graces and the practice of the most eminent virtues to establish a work which God, in his mercy, destined for the instruction, education, and sanctification of the poorest and most abandoned youth. As we continue with the story of his life, we come now to consider him as a patriarch at the head of an Institute which he created through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, which he built up carefully and sustained by his courage and his continual example of holiness. By considering what he had already accomplished, we can form some idea of what he would proceed to do. From a man who had already made such tremendous sacrifices, what could be expected, if not prodigies of grace and virtue?

## Chapter I

*God sends De La Salle new recruits of high quality; how he had to force himself to get used to the food his disciples ate; to what heights he carried the spirit of retirement, interior prayer, and penance.*

Having given up his rank as canon, De La Salle had indeed come down in the world. He was now poor, without influence, with few friends. He had nothing to offer those who wished to follow him except the cross of Jesus Christ. He asked nothing of them as a condition for entering his house other than a willingness to embrace entire and perpetual abnegation.

Reduced to a state as lowly and poor as this, he should, it would seem, have remained alone to face his unenviable destiny, with no expectation that others would imitate his choice and come to swell the ranks of his little flock. So it might have turned out, in fact, if he had been led by merely human considerations in all that he had done. He would have remained buried in obscurity, along with so many other men whose names have disappeared—who, even during their lives, were scarcely known in the cities where they lived—or among those who had chosen their condition in life out of vanity, eccentricity, or secret hypocrisy.

But it is not thus with those worthy men whom the Spirit of God guides and in whom his love rules. God hides them in the secret of his face, only to sanctify them at his leisure, after which he brings them forth again before the world, to procure his glory and the salvation of souls. Then, having become capable of doing great things for God and for their neighbor, they do not remain forever in the obscurity they love and prefer. People come looking for them, and heaven inspires many others to join them in the path Christ trod.

This is what happened to De La Salle also. In a short time, his little flock was increased by several young men who were inspired to leave everything because of his example. Some of them were university students who gave up their studies and came to join him in spite of the objections of their parents and the frantic appeals from worldly people who did all they could to turn them away from him.

Convinced that they would be sufficiently educated once they had learned the lessons taught by Jesus crucified, they believed that the only thing they needed was to know Christian doctrine and to practice it to the letter so as to be able to teach it effectively. They felt that even though they were neither priests nor clerics, they could fulfill this ministry of teaching, which is most necessary and most useful for the poor and most sanctifying for those who undertake it with zeal and humility. They generously gave up the idea of receiving Holy Orders and the worldly hopes they might have entertained in a more prestigious calling than that of schoolmaster. As the flock grew, the house they occupied became too small, and it was necessary to lease a larger one. Such a house was found in the rue Neuve. Later on, as we have already mentioned, De La Salle bought this house, thanks to donations he received in view of this purchase. This residence has remained the property of the Brothers, and they rightly consider it to be the cradle of their Institute.

Some ecclesiastics noted for their piety lived there, at first, with De La Salle and the Brothers. One of these was Monsieur Faubert,

who was very close to his benefactor and who at this time seemed to wish to follow in his footsteps. In a spirit of holy emulation, just as De La Salle was training Brothers, Faubert undertook to train some poor students for the priesthood and to create a sort of ecclesiastical minor seminary in this same house. This mingling of people with different vocations could not last, however.

De La Salle soon realized the drawbacks inherent in the situation and decided that the two communities should separate, but how did he go about it? By a new example of humility and meekness, two virtues which he displayed in all he did, he parted from the man who was so deeply indebted to him, as Abraham departed from Lot, by yielding the place to him. Taking his own followers away from those of the new canon, he left the house to the latter and his group, and he moved to another, much smaller, building not very far away. There he lived with his Brothers in poverty, mortification, and regularity, which presented a picture of the sanctity practiced by other religious orders in their beginnings. However, the holy Founder could not remain very long in such a small residence which was too cramped and unhealthy and entirely unsuited for his plans. So he asked Faubert to give him back his house, and he and his little community once more took up their residence there at the beginning of 1685.

How did De La Salle live at this time? Will anyone believe us if we describe his manner of living? Are Christians today prepared to admit that a man of their time actually revived the fervor of the early centuries and gave in his person examples of penance, mortification, humility, obedience, retirement, and prayer like those we admire in the desert Fathers, in many a Bernard, many a Dominic or a Francis, and in the other great saints?

I shall only be telling the truth if I say that the great sacrifices and heroic acts of virtue related in the previous book are only an anticipation of those which will follow. For the joyful hours when the Holy Spirit makes his presence felt and when he communicates himself interiorly to souls are hours of spiritual exaltation and expansiveness. These souls, inebriated with divine love and with the sweetness of grace, feel that they have been delivered from their limitations, raised above human frailty, made capable of achieving anything, and fired with the desire of doing all and suffering all for God. They enjoy deep understanding of the precious insights into the most sublime perfection; they conceive ardent longings and feel themselves impelled to undertake the most heroic projects. Still, it sometimes happens that returning to their mortal condition and held down by the same hand which had lifted them so high, they no longer have wings to fly, and

so they remain earthbound, plodding along with the rest of the human race. In this situation, deprived of heavenly consolation, they no longer feel enough strength and courage to pursue what they had undertaken, and so they leave unfulfilled their plans of perfection, which are easy enough to devise in imagination but which cost nature so much to execute.

De La Salle was not one of those men whom God favors in vain and whom self-love, sooner or later, brings back to the ordinary ways. He had indeed done much for God and received much from him, and his way of using these new graces was to engage nature in still bloodier combats and to achieve over his flesh even more complete victories than those which he had won over the world.

Tenderly loved as a child, very dear to his parents, brought up with all the care that their special affection and attention could provide, nourished in the midst of abundance, behold him now in the depths of indigence, struggling with poverty, which can well be called the basic misery of life. Accustomed to choice food, habituated to the amenities of life, will he be able to get used to a manner of living which barely furnishes enough of what is needed, so as not to die, and which allows nature to live, only to make it suffer? He had condemned himself to a type of living which forbade him the use of fire and very nearly that of wine, of fresh linen, of all the better foodstuffs. Will he be able to accustom his nature to what inspires it with horror and the mere sight of which provokes nausea? Will he be able to harden his body to accept cruel and bloody disciplines, to spend nights in prayer, to take the repose he needs on a board laid on the bare ground? Will he be able to spend days at a time in a place which offers little more space than a tomb and gives him only enough room to practice mortifications? Will he be able to habitually wear hair shirts or chains of iron bearing prickly points and to appear before his fellow citizens only in a garb apt to make everyone laugh at his expense and to draw down on him the hoots of the street urchins and the whole populace?

Yes, he will do all this. We shall see him undertake new and more strenuous combats and win new victories over his delicate nature by the terrible violence he practiced toward himself, first by enduring the sight of what was set before him, next by forcing himself to eat it, and then (it makes me shudder to say it) by swallowing again, despite all his repugnance, what his too delicate stomach had rejected.

Those who know the Brothers can testify that even today their food is of the most frugal type, coarse and unappetizing. It was far

more so at the beginning of their Institute in Reims, in Paris, and in Rouen. Some forty years ago, I heard people in Paris who were familiar with their manner of living say that they lived as austerely as the religious of La Trappe and that their food was even more mortifying than that served in that celebrated abode of penance. People called their house *the little Trappe*, and those who knew what went on claimed, with regard to the various forms of humiliation and mortification, that the Brothers rivaled those illustrious penitents who in our day have made a monastery of lower Normandy into a new Thebaid.

When De La Salle invited the schoolmasters into his home in 1681, he continued to live with his own brothers as he had done previously. When these left him, he did not modify his usual manner of living and did not change the type of food served at his table. Then, when he began to live with his disciples, although he banished from his table whatever might have satisfied sensuality, the food served was in no way unappetizing. But when he divested himself of all and became as poor as the paupers he took care of, he resolved to live like the poor and to eat as they did.

## De La Salle's difficulty in adjusting to the food of the Brothers

This decision was the outcome of others he had already put into effect, but it was not the least painful one to nature; I dare say that it cost him more than all the earlier ones. To conform to it completely, he forbade his disciples to serve him any food different than theirs. They were very much put out by this; he could not have commanded them anything which would have put their obedience to a sterner test. What they knew about his delicate constitution and fastidious eating habits made them despair of ever seeing him grow accustomed to their coarse type of food, so they tried everything to make him rescind this order, the execution of which was as much a sacrifice for them as it was for him. But they found him inflexible on this subject and were therefore obliged to give in and serve him what the others ate, thus submitting to his will and affording satisfaction to his spirit of penance.

It was then that De La Salle, in the spirit of Saint Bernard, would go to the refectory as to a place of torment. He was never in greater distress than when it was time to eat. Nature, alarmed at the mere thought of what it would have to endure, caused him to shudder when they brought on the soup. There ensued for him a grievous struggle, an agonizing conflict, for on such occasions nature and grace lock in strenuous battle, and the latter does not emerge victorious

over the former save at the cost of a galling ordeal. The former canon was indeed a pitiable sight at these times. His stomach turned, and his hand trembled; when he put the spoon into the bowl, he could not withdraw it. What will he do? Will he obstinately insist on overcoming a repugnance which seems to bring on an agony and threatens to burst a blood vessel in his chest, because of the superhuman efforts he makes to force himself to eat? But can he yield to nature? And was it not time for him to make his body do penance for having been brought up in so fastidious a manner?

He did violence to his feelings and ate, but he could not keep the food down. His vomiting began when he saw and smelled the soup; when he tried to eat it, the heaving became so violent that he brought up blood. Prudence would have suggested that he stop trying, for on such occasions exaggerated efforts often lead to serious consequences. But if he yields, he is vanquished. This was what the Holy Spirit whispered to this generous soul, secretly reproaching him with cowardice and with listening too readily to the siren voice of his sensual flesh and the perfidious counsels of what Holy Writ calls animal prudence. With new courage, he returns to the struggle. To win a total victory over himself, he forces himself to swallow again what he had thrown up, and this repeatedly. Before him I do not know of anyone who had ever given such an example of mortification. This torture, which lasted all through this first meal, continued for several more days. Everything they brought him—salted meat, coarse vegetables, and other dishes of the plainest kind of food—made him vomit.

## A long fast brings victory over his sensitive appetite

Distressed at not seeming able to overcome his repugnance and at having to start over again each day the same struggle against such long-standing delicacy as regards food, De La Salle had recourse to hunger to insure a certain victory. This remedy seemed worse than the disease and was in itself a major penance, but it must have proved effective, because devouring hunger teaches us to eat anything and provides an appetizing sauce for the most insipid and revolting food. A hungry body refuses nothing; everything seems good to it, and it consumes with pleasure what it would have turned from in horror when it was well and copiously fed. A strict fast, lasting for several days, wrought this sort of miracle on an overly delicate body, the miracle that De La Salle expected and which he had not been able to merit by the unusual acts of violence he had practiced. This long fast gave him appetite enough and taught his rebellious body to eat with

pleasure what he had not even been able to look at before. Food which had provoked nausea appeared appetizing to a body which lost its delicacy of taste only when it found itself deprived of all nourishment.

If the struggle was a hard one, the victory was complete, for the triumph he won over his flesh lasted all his life. His body was so well tamed, so perfectly mortified, that it seemed to be dead indeed in this regard, with no feeling, no inclination, and no repugnance for the most loathsome-tasting dishes. Years later, in 1693, when he was in Paris with some of the Brothers and living in extreme poverty, he and they were obliged to eat bread and other food which the most mortified persons could hardly have endured to look at. He ate it with no apparent repugnance.

He failed to distinguish between the dishes of vilest taste and those most savory. He ate both without seeming to pay any attention and rose from table to say grace without knowing what he had eaten. This became quite obvious one day when the good Brother cook inadvertently served De La Salle and the Brothers nothing but a portion of stewed absinthe leaves. All the rest were aware of the mistake and thought they were going to be poisoned—everybody, that is, except De La Salle. All left the dish untouched after tasting it, convinced that it was some kind of noxious herb. They preferred to leave the table as hungry as when they had sat down, to eat nothing rather than, as they thought, risk certain death.

De La Salle, who ate his entire portion, was very much surprised when his disciples told him what the children of the prophets said to Eliseus: *There is death in the pot!* They were all concerned and eager to find out what they had been served, but after investigating, they discovered that it was not poison but absinthe. If this new food did not provide them much nourishment, at least it served to divert them for a while.

In the end, the story and the false notion that they had at first conceived, after serving as a topic of conversation during recreation, became a matter for edification as they praised the mortification shown by their father. I almost forgot to mention that the Brothers did not miss the opportunity of practicing mortification, too, in connection with this meal, because their Superior had the dish served up to them the next day. Some were still unwilling to taste it the second time around, but eventually they were obliged to do so, for it kept coming back until they ate it.

Indeed, the examples that De La Salle gave them on this score, as on all others, were of daily occurrence; each day brought on a new

kind. When at table, whether he was distracted or attentive, he ate what was set before him without ever asking for what might be missing, without even showing by the least sign that anything was, in fact, missing. So it sometimes happened that he ate without having anything to drink, or he ate his portion without any bread or his bread without anything else, and he even ate things which were not meant to be eaten.

## Abandonment without reserve to penance and prayer

This exceptional degree of mortification of the taste enables us to judge De La Salle's mortification in everything else. None of the senses of his body remained without its special suffering; I was about to say its martyrdom. He himself became his own executioner, exercising on himself all the different sorts of austerities which Holy Scripture canonizes and which the saints practiced. Enveloped in a hairshirt, wearing a copper belt provided with sharp points, or wearing both of them, he doffed his penitential instruments only to use others even more cruel and harsh. I am speaking of his practice of scourging himself to blood. With whips made of iron, bearing pointed rosettes on the tips of the lashes, he tore his flesh pitilessly. The spots that appeared on the floor where his blood ran down or on the walls of the cell where he scourged himself betrayed silently, without his knowing it, to all the Brothers the saintly cruelty he exercised toward his body. "He treated his body too rigorously," said a member of his family to a Brother who is still living, "and like Saint Francis, he will be obliged to ask its pardon when he dies for all the suffering he inflicted on it during his life. He made himself a tyrant over his body, yet he had been brought up with extreme tenderness; no child was ever so delicately reared. Those who know this are the more surprised to see him revive in his person the penances practiced by saints such as Macarius, Jerome, and other famous penitents among the anchorites."

His children pitied their father and took pains to hunt out his instruments of penance and to remove them from his reach, thus sparing him, at least for a few days, the torments he suffered and giving his body a little respite. In this way, they managed to take from him, without his noticing it, six of his disciplines, all of which bore marks of his fervor, being stained with his blood. Did his body, so ill treated during the day, so exhausted by labor and worn out by austerities, get any chance to rebuild its strength somewhat by resting during the night? No doubt his body would have longed for such repose, but De

La Salle did not give it any, for he spent a good part of the night in prayer, and when necessity obliged him to pay to sleep the tribute which nature owes it, he reclined on the floor or slept in a chair. He used no other bed. If he could not rest comfortably there, he could not sleep for very long either, because the bell which called the Brothers to rise at 4 A.M. found him fully dressed, and so it became his rule to start his interior prayer at once, thus anticipating his disciples in this holy exercise. In fact, interior prayer which really never came to an end could hardly be said to begin. Almost all the day, in addition to the night, was consecrated to prayer and contemplation. He went from one to the other by a series of exercises which, under different names, seemed to be nothing but a continual interior prayer.

Leaving aside at such times everything which could have brought him into society and living as solitary a life in his native city as an anchorite in the desert or in his cave, he made himself invisible, as it were. He delighted in retirement, because this promoted his union with God. Indeed, his main concern was to cultivate this union and to avoid as far as possible all visits, whether paid or received, so as not to let his dealings with men interrupt his communing with God. In spite of his efforts, however, some of his old friends came by to distract him from his application to God. While gently chiding him for having become so unsociable, they told him that he seemed to have forgotten that we are born to live in society and that there existed in Reims other people besides himself. However distasteful it may have been for him to lay aside his preoccupation with God in order to converse with people, he did not show it by an external sign. No cloud flitted over his countenance, revealing the deep boredom he felt at not being left alone with his sovereign Good. His cheerful, serene, and gracious attitude made his presence agreeable, and his dignified manners—gentle, polite, and affable—were proof that solitude had not made an ill-tempered recluse of him or deprived his company of the charm and interest it had possessed when he was a canon.

As his Institute was still in its infancy, his greatest concern, indeed his sole preoccupation, was to water it with his tears, to cement its foundations with blood drawn from his veins by his rigorous disciplines, to buttress it by the penances he performed, and through his fervent prayers to draw down on it God's choicest and most abundant graces.

To make his supplications even more effective, the saintly Founder used to offer them at the tomb of Saint Remy. At the feet of this illustrious archbishop of Reims, rightly called the Apostle of France, he often spent not only a good part of the day but entire

nights, begging heaven, through the intercession of the saint who baptized the first king of the Franks, to show itself favorable to his undertaking and to bestow on himself and his followers that abundance of grace which fortifies the virtues and merits of those thus bedewed. To be able to pour out his heart all the more easily in the presence of God and to lay before the throne of God's majesty his prayers and entreaties at the very tomb of Saint Remy, he had won over the assistant sacristan of the church and persuaded him to lock him up in the sanctuary at night.

Thus he had full liberty to pray and to satisfy his devotion in a spot which favored it. He ended one day and started the next one by interior prayer. The saintly Founder, so happy at the feet of the holy patron of Reims and beneath the eyes of Jesus Christ, spent entire nights in the continual exercise of contemplation and prayer. So long as he remained in the city, he made it a rule for himself to devote to this pious practice the Friday and Saturday nights of each week, after spending most of the day there also. On these days, he went back home only for a short time, in order to keep in touch with what was going on there and to take some little food. Then he hastened to return to the feet of the Apostle of France to ask for his intercession before God and to prostrate himself once more before Jesus Christ.

In the silence of night, he made up for the shortness of his days, which did not suffice for his prayer. Alone, with no witnesses, what did he do? What did he say? Did he join penance to his prayer and vigils? Did he take the discipline with a fervor which the very holiness of the place would augment? Judgment day, which will make manifest the merits of the man whose story we are relating, will reveal it all to us. The tomb of Saint Remy was the refuge to which De La Salle never failed to return whenever some new storm arose to menace his foundation. In addition to the days and times mentioned, he often repaired thither on other occasions, earnestly seeking by his prayers and tears to dissipate the tempests and to turn aside the lightning bolts, conjuring the saint to offer his prayers before God's throne.

This great attraction for complete solitude and unceasing contemplation brought him, sometime later, to the retreat house of the Discalced Carmelite Fathers at Louviers, a few miles from Rouen. Everyone knows that these great promoters of the retired and contemplative life have certain houses, remote from the world, which they call *deserts*, because they live there like the solitaries of old in their hermitages in perpetual silence and in contemplation which is interrupted only by the absolutely necessary demands of human frailty. This spot, so suitable for communing with God, seemed like a paradise to

a man who wanted to cultivate society and union with God alone, but he could not stay there long. Unforeseen events recalled him to Reims and, as we shall see later on, forced him to leave, albeit with great regret, a delightful solitude.

We can say unhesitatingly that his great longing for interior prayer and the vehement desire he entertained to be alone with God made him almost indifferent to other concerns. The greatest displeasure he could experience was to observe and to be observed. Because of this, in spite of the remarks of his friends who reproached him with becoming unsociable, he tried as much as he could to remain alone, in solitude, hoping to avoid being known by anyone other than his Beloved. However, he had not been called to live the life of Magdalene exclusively but to live that of Martha as well, a life which held in store so much labor for him. To prepare him to undergo the asperities of this active life, heaven allowed him to enjoy the gentleness of contemplation. It was with much regret that he found himself obliged to cut short his prolonged prayer in order to devote more time to the affairs of his Community, which became more numerous after Nyel abandoned the schools he had taken charge of. At first, De La Salle had planned to limit himself to supervising only the schools in Reims. That was enough for him; he did not care to extend his obligations any further. Humility inspired him in this, but charity—which knows no limits—obliged him to let his zeal reach out to the other schools outside the city, to leave God for God's work, and to deprive himself of the solace of the interior life in order to procure the greater glory of his Lord.

Divine Providence, which was leading the Founder as though by the hand and whose directions he followed blindly, had made it impossible for him to refuse to take over the direction of the schools in Rethel, Guise, and Laon. These schools which Nyel had established also came under his control. In this way, divine wisdom showed that God had sent Nyel to Reims only to bring De La Salle into the orbit of God's designs. God wished to entrust the execution of these designs to no one but to him, since the earlier worker was not fitted for the task. Indeed, the direction of these three schools was too much for a man already advanced in years. Moreover, when Nyel had left Rouen, he had not planned on staying away forever; he hoped to be buried there.

To be able to follow his inclination with a good conscience, Nyel had vainly besought De La Salle on more than one occasion to take over the schools in question. Although the latter had repeatedly refused, Nyel kept insisting, and he presented new and more pressing

arguments to win his friend's consent. His age and the fact that it was impossible for him to provide these three establishments with the manpower needed were the reasons he advanced or, rather, the pretexts under which he dissimulated his longing to go back to Rouen. He did not, however, succeed in convincing De La Salle, who continued to say no, as we have mentioned before. Since he was getting nowhere by his pleas, Nyel made up his mind to abandon the schools to Providence and to go home to Rouen, where he died two years later, as we shall mention in the proper place.

No doubt Nyel foresaw what was bound to happen: necessity would force De La Salle's hand, and his charity would not permit him to turn a deaf ear to the needs of the poor nor to allow the schools to close. That was indeed what happened. Nyel's departure proved more effective than his presence and his importunities had been, and by abandoning the three schools, he obliged De La Salle to assume charge of them. The Founder could not turn down the new solicitations addressed to him by his dear friend, the parish priest of Saint Pierre in Laon, who implored him not to let these establishments close and not to shut his ears to the voice of Divine Providence, which seemed to be telling him plainly that God was sending him this new opportunity for doing good and that these schools had merely been prepared for him by Nyel's hands.

## Chapter II

*De La Salle calls together his principal disciples; they make an eighteen-day retreat during which he discusses with them all the matters which needed to be regulated; he listens to their opinions and follows them, not wishing to decide anything of his own volition.*

Now in charge of a number of schoolmasters in various towns, De La Salle thought the time had come to gather them into a small body and to adopt a uniform lifestyle. Although the Founder had succeeded in introducing a certain number of regulations, his followers did not yet make up a true Society. All of them dressed differently, some better than others. Each one taught as he thought best. All were free to leave the group and remained only as long as they pleased. They had no vows, no binding commitments. They depended on no one and owed obedience to no one. They were easy to call together, but as yet they

did not constitute what could be called *the body of a community*. For a Community is a body composed of several members having a Superior at its head. As its leader, he should animate it and give inspiration to the inferiors, who should live in dependence on him and not have any outlook different from that which he communicates to them. This subordination is the bond which preserves all the members in union, and obedience is the nerve center which keeps them all in order. The Spirit of God is the soul which should give life to this body, and the rule is the guiding force which should govern all its members' actions. As yet, the saintly priest's flock showed none of these characteristics.

To change the group of schoolmasters into a regular Community, what was required was to give them a special garb, rules and constitutions, and to establish among them perfect uniformity in all things in conformity with their vocation. It was necessary to inspire all of them with the same spirit, attitudes, dispositions, and views so as to make of them a society having but one heart and one soul, like the early Christians who, in forming the primitive Church, gave to the centuries which followed a model of what a perfect community should be. To succeed in doing all this, De La Salle thought that he should not impose any of his personal preferences. In his humility, he did not think that what needed to be done should come from him. Although destined to be the father of a new family made up of men who looked on everything only with his eyes, although inspired by God in his designs and enlightened by the graces which he received in his protracted communing with God, he grew more and more humbly distrustful of self. He would have considered questionable anything that might have been decided by his own choice. Dead to all natural considerations and to self-will, he wished to be nothing but the instrument of God, to act only through his impulse, and to follow his inspirations exclusively.

## He convokes an assembly of twelve of his principal disciples

In this disposition of self-effacement, the humble Founder called together his principal disciples, twelve in number, and met with them to confer on the means of giving some form to their new establishment, of insuring some stability among the members, and of attaching them to their state. This was certainly a matter of supreme importance which called for serious reflection or, rather, for enlightenment from on high. To secure these advantages, the fervent Superior proposed that they all make a retreat, a suggestion which was warmly welcomed. It began on Ascension Eve in 1684 and was to continue until

Pentecost, but in fact it was prolonged until the feast of the Most Holy Trinity.[1]

De La Salle began by a very pointed talk in which he informed his followers of the reasons why he had called them together and why he had suggested that they make this retreat. He gave them to understand that the order existing in the house at the time should make them consider the means of maintaining it. Regularity, he declared, is the soul of a community, and this presupposes wise regulations which ought to be tried out before being definitely prescribed, so that being accustomed to the yoke, the members might find it bearable when it was made obligatory. He insisted that the way to insure that the rules would be observed later on was to practice them first on a trial basis. These laws, which experience would have shown to be practicable, would now not appear onerous. By adopting such a prudent procedure, he said, when the time comes, you will not find anything in the new rules which you are not accustomed to. "Your heart will recognize your own work in the legislation which will be laid down, and the details it prescribes will seem agreeable to you because you yourselves will have been the lawgivers. Now that you have reached the point where I wished to lead you and I can testify to your fervor and pious dispositions, I wish to undertake measures with you to stabilize your state of life, to strengthen you in your vocation, to consolidate your union with one another, and to begin building the edifice of which you are the foundation stones."

He then reminded them of the ideas and suggestions which they themselves had often put forward, namely, of binding themselves to their vocation by vows. It was up to them, he said, to consider whether the time had come to impose on themselves such blessed chains which, while restraining their liberty, would bind them to God. He asked them whether, after remaining up to the present unattached to their vocation and free to come or go, they now felt that they should join themselves to it by some type of vow. He concluded by saying that on this point, as on all the rest, he wanted them to feel entirely free to declare how they felt and even freer to do whatever they wished. All he planned to do was to listen to them and to follow whatever the majority might decide. What he did recommend to them was to pray much and by a fervent retreat to place themselves in a position to know God's will.

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1. Following Maillefer, scholars today prefer 1686 as the probable date.

## Topics treated by the assembly

During this lengthy session of prayer and meditation, the Brothers had ample time to call upon the Holy Spirit and to prepare their hearts for his inspirations. In silence and recollection, each one had leisure to make himself attentive to the voice of God and to heed his intimations. Each one was also free to speak out and to express his thoughts and sentiments. De La Salle did not try to lead in one direction or another nor to suggest to them his own views or insinuate his own ideas. He let them be free to think and to say whatever they liked. No doubt the best thing for them, and the simplest, would have been to ask him to speak first and then to accept, like docile children, the heavenly illuminations granted to their father. A man such as he, filled with grace, was a mouthpiece of the Holy Spirit; his words were oracles for them. Perhaps they did this; perhaps they objected that they were his children and begged him to govern them like a father and to lay down laws for them without consulting their opinions or inquiring after their preferences. But how could they overcome his humility on this point, which allowed him only the right of listening, of asking for their opinions, and of going along with the majority?

Not that he failed to assist them with his insights or to redress their opinions when these were neither correct nor judicious, but he did this in such a way that his own self-love found no satisfaction in doing so, and their liberty of offering their advice and defending their opinions was not at all interfered with. The only right he claimed for himself was to speak much to God, begging God to address himself to this college of his twelve principal disciples and to make his holy will known through their mouths with such clarity that De La Salle himself would have no other choice than to subscribe to these ideas inspired by the Spirit of God.

We cannot mention here all the topics discussed during this assembly, nor can we list all the decisions made. We do know, however, that agreement was reached on certain regulations and that the adoption of a distinctive garb, the choice of a name for the association of schoolmasters, the food they were to eat, and the project of making vows were all taken under consideration.

The first question, concerning rules and constitutions, would have been premature if it had been decided at this point, because only time lets such projects mature and makes it possible to find the right solutions. The finest regulations in theory are not always the best in practice. It is easy to lay down obligations for ourselves but less easy to fulfill them with perfect fidelity. Prudence suggests that it is

wise to try out the yoke we wish to impose on ourselves and to take time to determine whether this yoke is supportable and whether we can undertake to bear it definitively with the help of grace. Outside of revelation, nothing but experience can teach people all they need to know about the responsibilities they may wish to assume.

Experience alone would enable them to assess the commitments they would wish to enter into, help them to come to a decision about the ties by which they would want to be bound, and make clear the price to be paid for the laws by which they would subject their liberty. Without such experience, they would either presume too much on God's help or rely too much on their own strength. It is in order to try out what God wishes to do in us and what we can do with his help that the Church prescribes a novitiate lasting at least one year for all those who desire to enter religious life, before she allows them to bind themselves by vows. This wise mother wants people to try out everything and to attempt first to lift the weight they propose to shoulder, to see whether they have strength enough to carry it. In the same spirit, she orders that nothing shall be kept hidden or disguised from the postulants concerning what is done in the religious house, that they be given the book of rules and constitutions to read, and that in addition to the normal austerities, other humiliations and mortifications be added during the novitiate so that the novices may know from their own experience what they will be binding themselves to for the rest of their lives.

In the same way, De La Salle was in no hurry to give regulations to the Brothers, regulations which are more easily prescribed than carried out. Wisdom told him that it is best not to establish statutes too soon, lest experience, the great mistress of good government, might force him to revoke them. He preferred to have the rules practiced for a long time before promulgating them definitively rather than published without a prior period of testing. He was persuaded that rules which remain a dead letter are soon abrogated by nonuse or by obvious violation. In a word, by having the Brothers live it first, he established little by little the sort of life he hoped to see observed by them, thanks to wise rules.

As a result, when the time came later on to draw up definitive rules, all he did was to set down in writing the usages which were being observed. In this way, the old traditions became the new laws. By submitting to them, the Brothers were only obliging themselves to what they had always practiced. And so, in this first assembly, the only question concerning the schedule was to agree on what was already in use and on some other points which needed to be introduced and

which have been hallowed by practice. The rest of this matter was left to Divine Providence.

The second topic on which the assembly deliberated was the question of food. Custom had already regulated this in a way that safeguarded the principle and practice of mortification, but lest relaxation might in time bring in the use of more fancy food, this was specifically forbidden. All fowl and other more costly kinds of meat were proscribed. Only the cheapest cuts of coarse and ordinary meat were sanctioned. On abstinence days, only vegetables and cooked greens were allowed, without much seasoning. Fish was not permitted either, except for the kind whose cheapness and low quality made it common in the diet of the poorest people. In a word, everything served at table was to conform with the spirit of poverty and penance which the Community professed. In addition, it was stipulated that this food, which afforded so little satisfaction to the appetite, should be doled out in small quantities.

The third topic seemed the most urgent, but the assembly still failed to reach a decision on it. Up to this time, the schoolmasters had worn in the house the clothes they had brought with them. No modifications had been introduced, except that they all wore a small collar. Exteriorly, therefore, they had remained looking like ordinary laymen; no special sign distinguished the members of the new Community from other lay people. De La Salle had recognized this lacuna for some time and had been looking for a way of remedying it, but he did not wish to make any decision on his own initiative. He left it to the council of twelve to decide, but when they considered it, they could not agree on what form the habit should take. De La Salle himself was not entirely sure either. The more he thought about the question, the more convinced he became that a change had to be made, but he felt less certain about how to go about it. As the group also remained quite undecided on this point, nothing was concluded, and they left it to the prudence of their father to resolve the issue at the time he thought proper.

If the subject of vows did not seem to call for any immediate action, it was still basically of the greatest importance. For it is really not all that difficult to select a habit of a color and shape which fit a given profession or to abide by the choice once made. But vows have consequences which need to be carefully examined. The ideal of perfection inspires them, but often enough, thoughtlessness has more to do with the decision to pronounce them than deep and well-regulated devotion. If it were as easy to fulfill them exactly as it is to assume the obligations they impose, it would be impossible to recommend

the taking of vows too warmly, but experience shows only too clearly that vows made without serious reflection and through indiscreet zeal are often poorly observed, and Satan warps these means of perfection into elements of disorder and chains by which he drags souls to their perdition.

So the wise Superior called for a discussion on the following points: 1) Should they make vows? 2) If so, which ones? 3) How long should they last: a year? several years? for life? Without hinting at his own opinion, he invited the Brothers to consider these questions. He had strong reasons for not wanting them to make the vow of chastity just yet, but he preferred not to explain his position until they had their say.

The fervor of these first Brothers was great. Their ardor for perfection would have incited them to make perpetual vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, but De La Salle, more enlightened and experienced than they, would not move so fast. He feared lest his children, by trying to run too quickly on the path to heaven, might meet with some stumbling block and fall. He apprehended that indiscreet fervor might carry them too far, might induce them to embrace the counsels of perfection too hastily, or that a secret presumption might lie at the root of their eagerness. For in theory—and for devout people who merely speculate—nothing is more beautiful than the evangelical counsels. Those who aspire to perfection without wishing to pay the price find them admirable. But only those who fulfill them to the letter know what this practice costs our feeble nature, which has to put forth such desperate efforts to rise above itself even when sustained by grace. So De La Salle, foreseeing what might happen, advised his men not to let themselves be carried away by imprudent enthusiasm, and he suggested that they delay a decision in order to let the proposal concerning perpetual vows come to maturity.

True, his disciples based their desires on plausible reasons. Since they wished to follow Jesus, naked and despoiled of all things, and to enter into the society of the children of Calvary, was it not proper, since they had no goods to divest themselves of, that they should root out of their hearts the last fibers of cupidity by renouncing all desire of possessing and all proprietorship? Why not oblige themselves to be, through grace and for the love of God, what they already were by nature: poor and penniless? Why not add the merit of the vow of poverty to the practice of the virtue? What danger could the vow run among men who loved poverty and cherished it even as Jesus Christ did? Furthermore, since they were in fact living the deepest poverty, had this not familiarized them with all its unpleasant aspects? What,

other than additional merit, could the vow of poverty add to the rigors of the life they led every day with so much joy?

As for the vow of chastity, they had been inclined to make it even before they entered the Community, since most of them had planned on it by envisioning the ecclesiastical state or some other condition incompatible with marriage. Their hearts desired to belong entirely to God, longed to be faithful to him, and swore him inviolable attachment with the help of his grace. The vow of chastity, far from increasing the difficulty of observing the celibacy which they had chosen through virtue, would on the contrary make it easier, thanks to the graces which it would win for them.

As for the vow of obedience, the most perfect of the three, only self-willed people find it difficult. Whoever has renounced self-will possesses a docile and tractable heart which desires nothing but submission. It was to obey, they said, and not to do our own will, which we have followed only too often to our own detriment and confusion in the world, that we entered this house. The vow will only strengthen the resolution we have taken of doing in all things the will of God while renouncing all attachment to our own.

## The Brothers in the assembly make their vows

They also observed that the past had taught them about the future and that the experience of the first schoolmasters had instructed them, since these men had gone back to the world, where their salvation was in peril. They had also learned from their own experience when they were tempted to leave the Society under the pretext that they did not find there any assurance for their future. They remarked that the natural inconstancy of human minds and the mutability of the human heart need to be firmly anchored and, as it were, nailed to what is good through the binding force of vows.

All these arguments were sound. They could not but please De La Salle, who rejoiced to see these neophytes of his Institute display so much goodwill and enthusiasm for perfection. But the time had not yet arrived for allowing them to reach out quite so far. Before they could pretend to this, grace needed the time and the opportunity to strengthen their wills in the search for good, to draw the line between superficial and solid virtue, to distinguish between the subjects who under similar outward appearances hid very different interior dispositions, and, finally, to prepare them to assume obligations whose merit depends entirely on the manner in which they are carried out. The man of God upheld this opinion with such solid arguments that all

the Brothers acknowledged that he was right, and while waiting for the day when in God's plans they could make perpetual vows, they agreed for the moment to limit them to three years.

At the same time, they decided that all of them would gather again in Reims a year later, at Pentecost in 1685, and that each one would then be free to make perpetual vows. This proposal, however, was again deferred and was not finally carried out until several years later. For the time being, it was settled that they would make vows for three years, and after interior prayer, De La Salle drew up the formula which has been in use ever since. Each copied it in his own hand, so as to pronounce the vows after the Founder, and what they then did was repeated each year until 1694, at which time the vows of the Brothers assumed a slightly different form, as we shall relate below.

De La Salle began the ceremony on the feast of the Most Holy Trinity, which is the great feast of the Community. What a joy it was for him to consecrate by his vow the choice he had made of obedience! True, he was still in possession of his freedom, and since he was a priest and the Superior of the group, it did not seem fitting for him to step down from his position to obey Brothers who were laymen, to obey his own inferiors, to obey men who lacked both learning and interior lights and who needed his advice and direction so sorely. But where does perfect virtue stop? Where others see an impossibility, virtue finds everything easy. The perfectly obedient man shall sing of victory. Besides, it was only right that De La Salle should crown all the heroic sacrifices he had already made by sacrificing his will and that he should join to all the merit already acquired that of a vow of obedience. But how could he practice it? That was a mystery which his humility would soon find a way of piercing: by stepping down from his position as Superior and placing one of his disciples above him, at whose feet he would throw himself in total submission. So, in view of this secret design, still hidden in his heart, he added the vow of obedience to the vow of poverty and to that of the chastity associated with Holy Orders. In this way, he found the secret of losing his life entirely, according to Our Lord's words, and of fulfilling to the greatest extent the ideal of Gospel abnegation.

After De La Salle, the twelve Brothers likewise pronounced the same vows for three years; the following year, 1685, eight of them renewed their vows. The four others were invited, but they did not choose to appear at the ceremony. They had changed their minds, and they also changed their state by leaving the house. If this scandalous departure of four of the twelve principal members, who were the hope and the foundation stones of the new Institute, was a cause

of tears and affliction for the servant of God, it afforded him and the others who remained a salutary lesson. This desertion made them conscious of their own weakness and taught them how little they should rely on their own virtue. It showed them how wise their father's conduct had been in not permitting them to pronounce perpetual vows and in insisting that they take a whole year to prepare themselves for so doing. Finally, they realized how much confidence and openness they should show toward a man who was obviously inspired by heaven and who seemed to have received from God special lights as to how they should be guided.

The other members of the Community also needed to be made more stable and firm in their vocation. The discussion centered around the links by which they should be attached to it. Each of the twelve set forth his own opinion. There were those who thought it would be best to allow them to make the vow of chastity; some wanting it to be perpetual, but others were opposed. There were those who wished to add to the vow of chastity that of obedience, either perpetual or temporary. De La Salle listened to what they had to say, and after weighing the arguments pro and con, he decided that it was best not to be in too great a hurry about proposing a vow of chastity to subjects who had not been in the house long enough or who had not yet given proof of true constancy in virtue. He felt that to settle them in their vocation, it would suffice to let them bind themselves by a simple annual vow of obedience; this vow, renewed every year, would attach them to the Institute as long as their goodwill perdured. If this grew weaker or disappeared altogether and tepidity and negligence undermined their vocation, instead of trying to keep them, it was better, after trying by every possible means to bring them back to their early fervor, to let them go so as to rid the Community of their presence. Everybody agreed to this; the sovereign respect they felt for their worthy Superior won over their assent and submitted their reason to him as soon as he had expressed his opinion. They used their freedom to reflect and to express their opinions only when he did not reveal his own and when his humility obliged him not to express his own views.

So, in accordance with this decision, all the recent arrivals in the house, together with all those who, it was felt, were not yet completely reliable, made the vow of obedience for one year. This they continued to renew every year on the feast of the Holy Trinity.

# CHAPTER III

*De La Salle gives his disciples a new and distinctive habit; why and how this came about; he has them assume the name of Brothers of the Christian Schools; the humiliations that this new garb procured for him and his followers; he teaches school himself; persecutions he had to endure on this account.*

The matter of dress remained undecided and was left to the prudence of the virtuous Founder. It was settled during the ensuing winter in the following circumstances. The weather became extremely cold, and the poor schoolmasters, thinly clad, suffered a great deal from the rigor of the season. The mayor of the city felt sorry for them, and one day when he met De La Salle on the street, he expressed his pity for them and advised him to give them some capotes, which would keep them warm and protect them from the inclemency of the weather. This article of clothing, called capote at Reims, was very commonly used at this time in that part of the country. The advice struck the pious Founder as judicious, and considering it to have come from on high through the mouth of one of the chief magistrates of the city, he adopted this garment for his disciples.

The only change he made in the capotes commonly used in Champagne at this time, which were made of all kinds of cloth and in all sorts of colors, was that he had them sewn out of coarse woolen material, dyed black, and lengthened until they reached down to about eight inches from the ground. Thus the capote could be worn over the habit like a sort of overcoat to protect the wearers from the cold and the bad weather.

This idea suggested another: to change the habitual garb which the schoolmasters wore. Up to that time, they had kept the secular clothes which they had worn in the world, clothing of all types and colors. Nothing was less fitting for people belonging to one and the same Community. The virtuous Founder succeeded in introducing a uniform garment by having it correspond to the capote, that is, by designing a cassock made of the same black material, somewhat the same as clerics used to wear, and similar to that which several religious groups still use. It was closed in front by metallic hooks and eyes. This modest uniform, which by its shape and its lack of adornment distinguishes the Brothers from other lay people, from ecclesiastics, and from all other religious, has become their special habit and is still worn by them today.

This new type of dress, which at first impressed people by its unusual appearance and which shocked so many, is in fact the most fitting that we could imagine for their state. Anyone who considers the matter attentively will agree that it is appropriate to their persons, their employment, and their character. Made of black material of the commonest kind, it bespeaks simplicity, modesty, and poverty. Its length, similar to that of ecclesiastical dress, distinguishes the Brothers from lay people. It reminds them to behave with circumspection and with gravity, reserve, and recollection, as well as to eschew the manners of the world.

This habit, moreover, deserving of veneration because of its form, inspires respect in the youngsters whom the Brothers teach and makes these children—stubborn, obstinate, and troublesome as they are—show consideration, attention, and even fear which otherwise they would not be inclined to feel. A short cloak of whatever color would not make the same impression on them; before long, they would prove unmanageable and unbearable to the Brothers if they did not find in the external appearance of the clothing of the Brothers and in their gravity and silence a barrier against that undue familiarity which breeds contempt.

This habit is also a constant reminder for the Brothers themselves. Its black color tells them that they should be dead to the world; by its coarse quality and lack of style, it stresses that they have embraced a state of abjection, poverty, and mortification; its very shape proclaims that they are consecrated to God and must live for God alone. This habit is a helpful and restraining influence when passions seek to show themselves. It is a severe monitor which reproves them for those faults inconsistent with their state of life; it is a sign which reveals to the public, in the places they frequent and in the actions they perform there, whether they are behaving properly, visiting inappropriate spots, using unbecoming language, allowing themselves to indulge in frivolous conduct likely to dishonor their profession. In a word, De La Salle was indeed rightly inspired in giving to his disciples this sort of habit, for no other would have suited them so well. Any other would afford them less protection from the seductions and dangers met with in the world.

It is true that this new dress was not, at the start, to everybody's liking and that later on it met with a great many critics. It is also true that its unusual and extraordinary shape brought down on the Brothers in all the localities where they eventually wore it a great deal of mockery, scorn, insults, and affronts. But a man as eager for humiliations as the pious Founder did not allow himself to be moved by all

this. He knew that the habits of most religious orders had occasioned the same sort of treatment at the beginning. Church history had taught him how the garb worn by the hermits and monks had been found shocking by the wise and by the lovers of this world, and by heretical emperors as well, especially the Iconoclasts and their followers.

He was well aware of the inhospitable treatment meted out to the first Franciscans when they appeared dressed in sackcloth and girt with a cord. He had read about the cruel treatment that this habit had provoked in Germany when the first twenty of the Saint's disciples entered that country. Children threw stones at them. The dregs of the populace chased them wherever they went. They were beaten and treated shamefully. People took malicious pleasure in dragging them around by their cinctures, pulling off their hoods, and tearing their sacks to pieces. Nor had he forgotten how the appearance and the dress of the Capuchin Fathers had appeared ridiculous to the worldly when they first beheld these new religious. The world would have been even more surprised had it known the motive which led these holy men to choose the habit they wore, which was, in fact, to arouse its mockery. Indeed, the first authors of this holy reform movement, filled with the spirit of their seraphic Father Saint Francis and like him eager for ignominy, had purposely chosen brown-colored sackcloth, worn in Italy by convicts, in order to show their contempt for the world and to draw down its scorn on themselves.

De La Salle had all these striking examples before him, and he invoked them to make his disciples esteem and love their new habit as the true livery of Jesus Christ, the Man of Sorrows. He wanted them to consider ill-treatment as the best way of sharing in the lot of the Crucified and to respect the habit that procured such ignominy for them. By the same token, the new habit became precious in his own eyes and worthy of envy. As we shall soon see, he donned it himself, so as to share along with his children in the various kinds of humiliations with which the world honored this habit while thinking it was discrediting it. The world was indeed shocked as soon as this habit appeared before its eyes. The worldly wise and even some sincerely good people could not find it to their liking. What did not both groups say to the pious Founder to get him to change it? If he had heeded all the advice given him on this subject, at this time and later, he would not have had time for anything but listening to childish remarks proper to women's chatter.

The Founder was obliged, however, to pay attention to the remonstrances made to him on this topic, some years later, by a person

of distinguished merit who invoked all sorts of arguments to induce him to modify the new habit. No doubt the servant of God's humility would have caused him to yield to the authority and insights of this person whom he respected highly and to modify the habit according to his wishes, if the proposals of the critics regarding the shape and makeup of the habit had not tended to make it more elegant and more to the taste of the public, thus causing those who wore it to be in greater danger of losing their spirit of simplicity and of contempt for the world.

Fearing, then, and with much reason that the change in the exterior would affect the interior and that the "old man" would find satisfaction at the expense of the "new man" in a habit that appealed to worldly people, De La Salle remained inflexible, all the more so since the only reasons brought forward in favor of the change were based on mere convenience. Such arguments could not stand up against those arising from the nature of the thing itself and from the undesirable consequences a change would have had. In fact, the habit that the person in question wanted the Brothers to wear would have at once violated the simplicity, poverty, and humility of which these "new men" made profession. Along with concern for propriety, it would have opened the door to vanity, self-love, and love of the world. For the less those who wore the habit were agreeable to the eyes of the world, the more appropriate it was to distance them from it. God's servants should not try to please God's enemy. Once this desire insinuates itself into a heart, it soon extinguishes the desire to please the Creator.

For men whose whole ambition was to conform themselves to Jesus Christ, it was a blessing to wear such an ignominious garb which resembled that which the soldiers put upon the shoulders of Jesus Christ in derision. Of course, since De La Salle remained firm on this occasion and replied that he could not bring himself to yield to reasons of mere propriety and to set aside the serious motives which had led him to give to the habit of his Institute the form which was so sharply criticized, he was treated as a stubborn dolt, a man who followed nothing but his own ideas. As he had expected this reaction, he let people talk but changed nothing.

Fearing lest the authority or the considerable number of those who did not like the habit as it was might impress the Brothers who wore it, he wrote a memorandum to explain and justify their style of dress. In it he set forth his reasons and the motives for his refusal so cogently and in such a Christian manner that he won back to his point of view those who seemed to be the most strongly opposed to it.

## A new name: Brothers of the Christian Schools

The adoption of the new garb brought about a modification in the name of the Community. The name "Brothers" was the one that fitted them best, so they chose it, leaving the name schoolmasters to those who perform this function for pay. Humility and charity suggested giving up that name; it had not even been fitting for men who professed to run schools only so that Jesus Christ might reign in them and so that they might teach Christian doctrine gratuitously. If the name schoolmasters had been acceptable up to this time in a house where uniformity of lifestyle and equality in all things had not yet bound the subjects together and where some of them were still vacillating in their vocation, it was no longer proper now that they had joined together to form a single body. Consequently, the name Brothers truly belonged to them, a name which nature gives to children who share the same blood and the same father on earth and which in religion describes those who have the same Spirit and the same Father in heaven.

In this way, the name Brothers of the Christian and Gratuitous Schools became thenceforth the official name of the children of De La Salle. From now on, we shall call them by no other. This appellation is the correct one because it includes the definition of their state and indicates the mission proper to their vocation. This name reminds them that the charity which gave birth to their Institute must be its soul and life, that it should govern all their deliberations and animate all their projects, that it should inspire all their decisions, rule all their undertakings, govern all their words and deeds. This name teaches them the excellence of the duty they have assumed, the dignity of their state, and the holiness proper to their profession. It tells them that as Brothers they owe each other mutual proofs of tender but spiritual friendship and that considering themselves as the elder brothers of the children who come to be taught by them, they should exercise this ministry of charity with truly loving hearts.

The capote and the soutane made of cheap, coarse material called for shoes and hats of the same style, thus making up an accoutrement characterized by perfect poverty and appropriate for men who had given up all attempts to please the world. In those days, people wore large, broad-brimmed hats, but those which the pious Founder had made for the Brothers showed even wider brims than those in general use. His idea was to make the Brothers look different from worldly people in every respect, to allow them nothing resembling what the world admired, and to arouse between them and the

world so deep an antagonism that they would not even think of becoming reconciled with it. To provide them with footgear in keeping with their headgear, he had shoes made with a thick double sole, like those worn by farmers or by those engaged in heavy labor.

Such an outfit produced the effect that De La Salle expected it would. He aimed at setting up such a contrast between his children and the children of the world that neither group would ever want to have anything to do with the other. He hoped to accustom the Brothers to the outcries and insults of the populace, which, as a rule, rewards them for their labor only by affronts. He wanted to see them established in that tranquillity of soul which is normally found only in the depths of true humility and in perfect death to self. This goal could quickly be reached by the practice of mildness, patience, bearing wrongs meekly, and the other virtues which—every step they took through the streets clad in their new garb—gave them occasion to practice. Hardly had they set foot outside their house, when critical and ill-intentioned eyes fastened upon them with derision. Evil tongues launched poisoned darts to wound them, and everybody on the street, from inside and outside the houses, came forth to meet them or waited until they passed, in order to cover them with contempt and derision.

People pointed the finger of scorn at them. They were escorted with raucous cries amidst scenes of near riot. They were mimicked in public, and whoever invented some new outrage upon them thought he had done something very clever indeed. Jeers and hoots accompanied them wherever they went. Passersby stopped in the streets to take part in the taunts hurled at them. Artisans left their tasks unfinished in their shops to join in the merriment. Street urchins made up a new game: following the Brothers and yelling after them. The mob found pleasure in covering them with abuse; everybody enjoyed playing tricks on them and laughing at their expense.

The same farce began anew day every day. When the Brothers walked to and from school, they were accompanied there and back with vilification. They were lucky when they got off so easily; often they were spattered with mud and pursued by those who threw stones at them until they reached the door of their house. In addition to their clothes that the rabble considered ridiculous, those among the Brothers—and there were many of them—who adopted a simple air and unpretentious manners got more than their share of derision. They could all rejoice at being true men of sorrows and at having found their treasure in the company of him who was overwhelmed with opprobrium.

Their lot was that of the Apostles, and they underwent the same kind of treatment. They could say with Saint Paul, *We are looked upon as the offscouring of the world*; we are rejected like filthy scum on stagnant water or on the frothy sea, like the filth and excrement of the earth. The world rose up in wrath against these new-type men and even more so against their manner of living, showing only harshness, rigor, and animosity toward them. Let us say instead that the devil feared this new company of evangelical workers that the Father was sending out to cultivate the most neglected corner of his vineyard, and so he poured out all his fury and rage against these men. It was he who set poisoned tongues to wagging, vomiting all sorts of injuries against them. He it was who put into wicked hands the stones that bruised them and which would have pleased the throwers all the more if they had caused painful wounds.

The poor Brothers, whose long-suffering was put to the test every day, really needed heroic patience in order not to succumb to the protracted persecution they endured. The mini-war which the world had declared on them did not last for only a few days; it went on for years. All during this time, these heroes of Christian patience had to endure from their fellow citizens the same kind of torments that the first Christians suffered from the pagans, with the exception of prison and torture. Insults, ignominy, injury, ill-treatment—nothing was spared them. Even those who favored the establishment of the Christian and Gratuitous Schools and who lauded this work as it deserved declared themselves against the Brothers and treated them like enemies. Everything about them shocked these people: their lifestyle, their garb, their simplicity and modesty, the silence they observed in the streets.

What kind of people are these? they asked in mockery. Where do they come from? What race gave them birth? Who ever saw anything like this? They seem to have emerged from the tomb; they are dressed like scarecrows. No one can tell whether they have eyes or tongues. They never speak. They never open their eyes. Do they have tongues? They will end up forgetting how to speak! Why have eyes and not use them? Why did God give us sight, if not to see where we are going? These Brothers are like the idols spoken of by the royal Prophet: they have mouths, but they speak not; they have ears, but these are deaf; they have eyes, but they keep them shut all the time; they have hands, but they remain motionless. Only their feet keep moving, bearing from place to place these strange statues who would seem lifeless if they did not show at least this sign of life. This was how the worldly wise made fun of those who had become fools for Christ's sake.

De La Salle did not need to envy his disciples this sort of treatment, because he received the lion's share of such outrages and abuse. The father was being persecuted in his children, the master humiliated in his disciples. He was the main actor whom the public brought out on stage to make sport of and to laugh at his expense. It was he whom the worldly wise thought they saw humiliated when they beheld his Brothers surrounded, jeered at, and derided by an insolent mob of ruffians. All the blows aimed at them were felt by him, and the insults heaped on them rebounded onto him.

Nor was this all. Outraged every day in the year and almost at every hour of the day in the person of his children, he was personally insulted more often and more outrageously than any of his followers. When he left the house, as soon as he had taken a few steps, he ran into carpers, people who lay in wait to affront him. They always had their taunts ready, and they seemed to have an inexhaustible supply of these on hand to hurl at him. They railed at him over the state he had given up, over that which he had embraced, over his eccentric manner of living, over the supposed extravagance of his behavior and his dress. The imaginary dishonor he was bringing down on the chapter of which he had been a member and on his family, one of the most highly respected in the city, the supposed wrong he had done to his brother by not leaving him a benefice to which his birth seemed to give him a right—all were crimes which people had not forgotten. They were still fresh in people's minds, and the wounds they had left in certain hearts were still bleeding. All thought they had a right to blame what he was now doing, because of what he had done, and to find fault with the new examples of virtue he was giving, even as they had criticized the previous ones, characterizing them as imprudence, weak-mindedness, singularity, hypocrisy, stubbornness, ambition, and exaggeration.

The remarkable thing is that these ungrateful people who during the recent cruel famine had eaten his bread and had profited by his distribution of his fortune, these same hungry people whom he had fed with so much charity, had already forgotten their benefactor and his kindness and could not seem to find any other way of thanking him than by vilifying him. Some addressed cutting reproaches to him; others overwhelmed him with invective. Sometimes he was exposed in the streets to physical violence from people who had no veneration for his virtue, no respect for his priestly character, no consideration for his rank. More than once, stones were thrown at him. We say nothing of what he had to suffer from his relatives and former friends, who were among the most notable people in the city. It is easy to

imagine how they treated one whom they considered as an enemy of the family, an unreliable relative, a man who had embarrassed them and degraded himself by his extraordinary and bizarre behavior.

## De La Salle takes on the role of schoolmaster

What rubbed raw the wounds in their hearts and incited them to criticize De La Salle even more bitterly was the new token of humility which he began giving and which he continued with the same generosity. We can even say that his family and his worldly friends were more humiliated by this than he was himself and that they felt extreme confusion over a step which the whole city found utterly ridiculous and out of place. Here is what happened.

Some of De La Salle's disciples were most eager to walk in his footsteps and to keep pace with him in his progress toward perfection. But not having received as much grace as he, they soon exhausted their strength, and excessive austerities and exaggerated fervor led to their death. These unexpected losses caused problems in the schools, because the positions of these dead Brothers were not filled. De La Salle tried to replace them as soon as possible, but since he did not have enough candidates ready to fill the shortages, he resolved to do so himself and began to teach school in the Saint Jacques parish. To do this properly, he felt he should wear the Brothers' habit. So he exchanged his long clerical mantle for one of their capotes. He put on the wide-brimmed hat and the thick-soled shoes which made up the customary dress of the Brothers. Thus outfitted, he went to teach school. When the world saw him thus disguised, so to speak, wearing a capote with long sleeves, made of the coarsest and cheapest material, and a soutane of the same cloth underneath, we can easily imagine the guffaws his appearance provoked in the city, the ribald cries of the street urchins, the hoots that issued from the assembled rabble delighted at this opportunity of satisfying its innate meanness.

On this occasion, nothing was spared to cover him with confusion and to satisfy his taste for abjection. He drank deep at the chalice of ignominy and tasted every sort of humiliation. Not once, not twice, nor thrice did the virtuous Superior choose to expose himself to such outrageous treatment. He had plenty of time to grow used to it throughout the several months during which he left his house, twice a day, to go to give an example of humility by teaching school. In addition, he would have felt that he was failing in his duty had he omitted any of the teacher's least responsibilities. So, to fulfill them to the

letter without leaving out anything, he proceeded, just like an ordinary Brother, to lead his pupils to holy Mass every day, and on Sundays and feasts, he accompanied them to High Mass and Vespers in the parish church. He remained standing at the head of the group with a modest, recollected, and devout attitude which filled all right-thinking people with admiration. They were indeed surprised to see a doctor, former canon, distinguished gentleman, and person of such high merit playing the role of schoolmaster, accepting the unpleasantness it involved, and carrying out the lowliest duties connected with it. They could not sufficiently praise the Almighty, who—when it so pleases him—can effect such marvelous changes in hearts and such great prodigies of grace.

Most humiliating for the pious Founder was the fact that to go to discharge his task as a teacher, he had to pass beneath the eyes of some who had once been his friends and had now become his enemies, censors, and critics. Far from trying to avoid this by timid evasion or by shrinking from these encounters which nature recoiled from, De La Salle showed himself with humble magnanimity in the habit of a Brother of the Christian Schools, thus braving the gaze of his family and of the illustrious chapter of the metropolitan church when he went to exercise his functions as teacher. He continued acting thus with the same constancy even as he had begun, and he discontinued this humiliating practice only when another Brother could take his place at the Saint Jacques school.

All during this time, torrents of humiliations from many directions swept over the humble priest. It seems that God took pleasure in fulfilling his desires and in satisfying his servant's noble thirst for derision. For although De La Salle went forth himself to meet these trials and did everything to draw them down upon himself, a good many others befell him from unexpected sources, trials which proved very hard to bear.

We must not disguise the truth. The fact is that his disciples, although fervent, were not at this time very adept at their task. Among them there existed no uniform method of acting in class, no definite rules about the manner of conducting a school. Their goodwill was considered a sufficient title to put them in charge of a class. Without having been properly trained for this very difficult function, these young Brothers were sent to perform it without methods, skills, or sufficient aptitudes. In those early years, De La Salle had not yet been able to set up a novitiate to try out the vocation of his candidates, to correct their defects, to reform their tendencies and character, to shape their manners and attitudes—in a word, to impart to them the

spirit of their state and prepare them for the mission they aspired to. The fervor which reigned in the house made up for this, in a way, for upon entering, they received an initial infusion of this spirit. All those who presented themselves were admitted; they came because they had been struck by the examples of piety and patience given by De La Salle and the Brothers. They sought admission to a house which offered them only a hard, poor, laborious life and a penitential existence. The public rewarded them only with mockery and insults for the gratuitous instruction given to the young. It was hardly probable that anything but the Spirit of God could bring to such a Community young men who had nothing to hope for but rigorous penance within it and the ill-treatment of the world outside of it. All that was asked of them was to show goodwill and common sense.

Once they had been accepted and had followed the regulations of the house for a few days, they were sent to teach, assigned to a class to exercise a mission which they knew little or nothing about. Each one struggled along as well as he could, which ordinarily meant rather poorly. By their not having had any apprenticeship, it was scarcely possible for them to succeed in such a demanding task in which they themselves were still tyros. Since they had no rules to guide them in teaching nor any principles to show them how to act, they taught haphazardly; this, of course, meant much trouble and fatigue for these Brothers themselves and little progress in learning for the students. As a result, the two main elements of Christian education, namely, instruction and an effective method for imparting it, were not being achieved.

To teach reading, writing, arithmetic, and Christian doctrine effectively, one needs to have learned all this perfectly; to know it perfectly, one should have learned it from good teachers within the Community. This was what was lacking at that time. The art of sound classroom procedure is more difficult than we might think. It calls for natural ability, a method, silence, mildness combined with gravity, calm, great patience, and above all, much prudence. This art has its own rules and is acquired mainly by experience. Men who were ignorant of these rules and who had not had time to procure the experience needed could hardly teach successfully.

Furthermore, discipline is very necessary, especially in schools attended mostly by the children of the lower classes. It holds the rebellious in check, incites the slothful, masters the defiant, overawes the disorderly, curbs the playful and inattentive. It is required to bridle the insubordination of youngsters who lack a proper upbringing. Such discipline is a duty for schoolmasters, but it is very difficult to exercise

toward lads who are vicious, gross, badly brought up, and display all the defects of the low social level from which they spring.

Correction and punishment must be meted out with due measure, at the proper time, and in the right way. Too much discipline or not enough, punishment administered at the wrong time (too soon or too late) or inflicted with passion and without regard for the proprieties—these are all mistakes which must be avoided. Any lack of circumspection or the slightest imprudence changes the remedy into a poison. Much self-control is called for, as well as much consideration for the students. The Brother must possess complete control over his own passions to be able to correct at the right time and in the right way, to be neither too soft nor too harsh toward the young who have strayed from duty's path and who can be so exasperating at times. He must never show caprice in this matter, still less uncontrolled temper. To govern a classroom properly, he must constantly renounce his natural feelings and not follow his inclinations in any way. He would have to be more than human to deal with those who themselves are barely human. It would take a noble spirit to manage these boys who show nothing but bad spirit. Faith and reason alone should rule in a Christian School; they should lead to the constant practice of humility, patience, mildness, and prudence. If there is any failure on this point in a school, the result will immediately appear in the form of unrest among students.

It is not difficult to understand, therefore, that these young Brothers—brash and hotheaded even though fervent and sincerely pious, untrained or unprepared to keep a class in order and silence, perhaps themselves not very well versed in reading and writing—soon made mistakes which led to more disorder and trouble. When some of the teachers lost face by such faults, the troublemakers among the students defied them and paid no more attention to their punishments than to their lessons. Then the really resentful pupils, who enjoy nothing more than to catch their teachers in some fault, to disconcert or to disturb them in order to make fun of them and laugh at their expense, never failed to profit by every chance they got to stir up disorder, confusion, and upheaval as soon as these teachers provided them with the least occasion for doing so. Moreover, these troublemakers, angered rather than corrected by the just punishments warranted by their bad conduct, only sought to avenge themselves on the teachers by spreading false and exaggerated accounts by insinuations and complete fabrications which they concocted and related at home, either to excuse themselves in the eyes of their parents or to arouse the indignation of the parents against the Brothers.

## Outrage of the parents against De La Salle and his Brothers

Some of these lads remained defiant, incorrigible, and uncontrollable; the Brothers were at a loss as to what to do with them or how to bring them to do their duty and make them behave. At times, perhaps, the Brothers went beyond the limits of just chastisement; as we have said, it is difficult on such occasions to keep to the happy medium. At any rate, De La Salle had to bear the blame for the faults of both boys and Brothers. Some parents, showing even less sense than their children whom they had so badly raised, instead of restraining them by wise correction, encouraged their evil dispositions. They came to complain bitterly to De La Salle about the punishments inflicted by the Brothers; they made him the scapegoat on whom they cast their reproaches, invectives, and insults.

Thus the only innocent person in the whole business was condemned as though he alone had been guilty, and he had to suffer for the indiscreet zeal of his disciples as well as for the disorderly conduct of the students. He had to endure the anger of the parents who came to him uttering bitter recriminations as though to take revenge on him for the supposed ill-treatment inflicted on their children in the schools. On these occasions, the most reasonable ones limited themselves to complaints and reproaches while the most violent did not stop short at outrages and threats of violence, the irritated parents being joined by the rabble which is always ready to stir up trouble and to proffer insults.

These scenes took place at the door of the Brothers' house and were of frequent occurrence. When he emerged, De La Salle was seldom able to avoid being the object of these complaints and their victim as well. The hoots of the populace began when he appeared on the doorstep and followed him as he went along. During the eight years he remained in Reims, this ignominious escort frequently gathered around him when he left the house and when he returned. Patience put to such a long and trying test was indeed calculated to make a saint of him. So many persecutions and humiliations, so courageously endured, prepared for and deserved the graces which the Institute needed. The pious Founder was sowing in tears; today he reaps in joy. He needed invincible fortitude in order not to yield to such furious and incessant attacks, and God granted this to him. With a less heroic degree of virtue, he would have succumbed and abandoned the whole enterprise, but a soul is capable of all things when God's arm upholds it and his spirit fills it. If it must struggle at every step, it wins victories at each moment. The temple of charity is built

upon the ruins of self-love. Love for contempt and abjection and a salutary detestation of self keep pride in chains along with all the other vices and passions and erect in the human heart a trophy to the pure love of God.

Even prudent and well-intentioned persons thought that De La Salle carried his zeal too far and that he was risking his own safety too much. Who would ever have thought, they asked, that a man of his rank would have brought himself so low, would have come down to such a wretched state? On his part, he let them talk, and he thought only of how he might do more good. He listened calmly to the advice and remonstrances offered him, but he promptly forgot both. He silenced within his heart what his own feelings might have suggested, in order to hand himself over to the spirit of the cross. After replacing a Brother at the Saint Jacques school, he returned to his retired mode of living and once again took up his exercises of prayer in the little cubicle which he had selected and which was scarcely big enough to hold him. There he spent the days and part of the nights in contemplation. He left it only to be present at the community exercises, and he enjoyed being there so much that he could hardly tear himself away to go to take some nourishment.

## Chapter IV

*Fervor of the first Brothers of the Institute.*

Although De La Salle strove to keep his austerities and penances hidden from others, he could not conceal them from those who lived in the same house with him. His children observed their father so as to imitate him, and they felt a holy ardor to follow in his footsteps in the most arduous path of perfection. Their eyes, attentive to all his actions, studied him everywhere and were fastened on him, as on their model, in order to copy him. Although he was clever enough to veil some of his penances from these household sleuths, they were skillful enough on their part to discover many of them.

The daily examples of virtue which they beheld in him made it clear to them that there were many others which he tried to keep hidden. The pious Founder's heart, so filled with divine love, was strongly inclined to the practice of penance and mortification. He could not conceal this tendency from his disciples; indeed, he made it obvious to them that he did not spare his flesh and sought to crucify it in all

things. From what they saw him do, they could conjecture what he might be practicing in secret. The acts of mortification which good example obliged him to perform in public hinted, at least in part, at those which his humility made him shroud in secrecy. The result was a pious curiosity on the part of the Brothers to discover these penances, and a noble emulation led them to imitate them. The Brothers could follow De La Salle by the traces of his blood which he left behind, and they managed to find the cruel instruments of penance he used to torment his body. These examples completed what his instructions had begun and persuaded them to become like him in the practice of penance and prayer.

In this new Community, there was talk only of heaven and of the way to attain it, only of perfection and the means of reaching it, only of the virtues and how to make them pure and heroic, only of divine love and what must be done to acquire it. The language spoken there was entirely different from the conversation heard in the world. Among the Brothers, there reigned the pursuit of humiliation, self-abnegation, flight from the world, and silence, recollection, interior spirit, the life of retirement and solitude, the love of crosses and of suffering. To know Jesus Christ and him crucified, to model themselves after him and express his life in their own persons, to bear about always the dying of Jesus in their bodies—thus it was enough for them to become living portraits and perfect images of Christ; they cared to know nothing else.

Such was the ambition of these early Brothers. In this they made all their search for knowledge consist. In their company, a worldly person, a child of the old Adam, would have felt as though in a strange land; he would have been entirely different from them, and his aspirations would have been altogether alien from theirs. He would not have understood their talk, would not have been able to make himself understood by them. Judging by their ways, their language, and their manner of living, he would have taken them for men from another planet or for men come down from heaven.

The father had enkindled such an ardent fire among his children that they could not be satisfied by limiting themselves to the practice of ordinary fervor, any more than he could. They aspired only after God, longed only to suffer for God, to crucify their bodies, and to make themselves like unto the Man of Sorrows. Enthusiastic over the practice of penance, they begged for permission to engage in it, even to the point of importunity; they were satisfied only when all their requests were granted. They never had enough; to content them, their Superior had to permit them to use disciplines, hairshirts, and iron

chains as much as they wished. The only jealousy among them was directed to the one who happened to have more of these instruments to use. De La Salle, who was not backward in this matter himself, easily gave in to their desires. If he tried to put limits on their fervor, he put none on his, and thus he became for them the object of a noble emulation or of a holy despair.

They had, in fact, no reason to complain too much about him on this score, for his own attraction for austerity made him liberal in granting them permissions in this matter. He even gave in to them too much, as we shall see. What he might be reproached with is to have allowed them to exercise on their bodies some of the holy cruelties that he practiced on his. These travelers with De La Salle in the desert of this world, filled with the heavenly ardor he had imparted to them, ran with all their might in the footsteps of their father, following the radiance of his virtues on the path to perfection. Unwearied in practicing penance, they requested permission for even more. Once they had done one thing, they begged to be allowed to try another. Each in turn came asking for these favors, and they found that their turn took too long to arrive. Before and after meals, in the morning after prayer, in the evening after the examen, at one time or another, the Brothers surrounded their teacher and importuned him with pressing earnestness to allow them to perform some new humiliation or fresh act of austerity.

The Brothers were greatly disappointed that they could not give free rein to the impetuosity of their desires but had to restrain themselves within the limits set by strict obedience. Since these fervent religious wanted nothing but God, their intention was pure. Neither self-love nor self-will had anything to do with the mortifications which they longed to practice, for the spirit of obedience ruled over the spirit of penance. These truly obedient men would have thought that they were doing penance for the devil and not for God had they indulged in any austerities not sanctioned by obedience. The vehemence of their desire to crucify their flesh was measured by their eagerness in asking their Superior to give them the merit of obedience. As we said, they had little trouble in convincing him or in securing permission for the frequent use of disciplines, hairshirts, iron chains, and other instruments for making the body suffer.

Various kinds of humiliation were also highly prized by them; there are none that the Spirit of God did not inspire them to try. Wherever they happened to meet De La Salle, if they had committed some fault, they threw themselves at his feet and asked for a penance. They revealed all their defects to him and requested permission to

manifest them to others. Whatever could cause them the most embarrassment was the first thing they revealed. Whatever could lead others to think less highly of them was what they most eagerly wished to publicize. They seemed to take pleasure in declaring openly to all what could dishonor them in the eyes of others, and the public was not slow in showering them with opprobrium and infamy. The people who were so assiduous in insulting the Brothers when they appeared in public sorely disappointed them when they failed to do so. The Brothers felt that contempt was due them and that they were treated justly when they were reviled as the offscouring of the world, when people threw stones at them, when they were spattered with mud. In the house, each one rivaled with the other to take on the lowliest and most unpleasant tasks which nature found least attractive. The only time they ever quarreled was when it was a question of vying in humility and of seizing opportunities to do things that self-love finds most mortifying and pride hard to bear. They argued only when occasions arose to contend with each other in humility and to profit by chances to perform actions which most sensibly mortified self-love and pride. To be brief, this new Community was a school of virtue and of perfection where each one strove with the others in noble emulation. No one gave or received anything but striking examples of fervor, charity, humility, mortification, silence, recollection, obedience, patience, zeal for the salvation of their neighbor, love for their vocation, and concern for the instruction and sanctification of poor children. However, it is true that a number of these fervent disciples of De La Salle, by wanting to follow their father too closely, were the first to go to their graves.

Carried away by the power of his example, the Brothers overcame him by their insistence, and all of them together let themselves be swept away by the tidal wave of fervor which led them to certain excesses in the matter of penance. De La Salle should have restrained them and used the bridle of obedience to hold back these men who were on fire with enthusiasm, who let the vivacity of their desires spur them on. But how could he have done this? He was the first to surrender to this attraction. In this matter, he himself was the most culpable of all. He did not feel himself justified or even willing to reproach them for a fault which he loved. If both father and children, setting no limits to their maceration, committed a fault, it was a fault which they did not wish to correct. They could not have brought themselves to make up for it, save for practicing even greater penances than those which they were reproached for. But we must admit that they went too far in this matter; it is a fault which can indeed be

imputed to them. Which of the saints does not deserve the same reproach? All of them have sinned in this manner, and none of them has been willing to acknowledge and confess this crime. If some of them, like Saint Francis, recognized as much on their deathbeds and begged pardon of their bodies for having treated them too severely, they never did so until it was too late to admit their culpability, too late to correct themselves. After all, God may have wished to raise up in these later centuries the spirit of penance which characterized the first days of the Church, to help us remember that this spirit is the spirit of primitive Christianity and the spirit of the Gospel and to show that any spirituality which waters it down, disguises, or modifies it is a false and deceptive type of spirituality.

## The intense fervor and the harsh life result in many deaths

The fact is that at the Trappist monastery, at Septfonds and elsewhere in France, we have seen in our day the ancient practices of austerity revived by men who, because of their physical constitution, would not have been thought capable of enduring the vigils, fasting, and other maceration of the flesh so commonly practiced of old in the deserts and at the beginning of religious orders. Yet these men carried these mortifications almost to the same lengths as did those heroes of former times. In the seven or eight years from 1681 to 1688, when De La Salle left Reims to go to establish schools in Paris, he lost over six of the fifteen Brothers who composed the Institute at its beginning in the schools of Reims, Laon, Guise, and Rethel. All these men died prematurely before reaching the age of thirty. There were others whose health was ruined and who had to seek help outside the Community. From 1688 up to his own death in 1719, De La Salle had to deplore the demise of at least forty-five more Brothers, and he experienced the joy of sending them on ahead of him into paradise. Of these, only eight or nine were over thirty years old.

A house as poor, austere, and mortified as that of the Brothers was indeed apt to become a cemetery for the bodies and to people heaven with the souls of those who dwelt in it. Human reason was not listened to there, still less the voice of mitigation or relaxation. The young men allowed themselves to be carried away by the pious excesses of their devotion, and they condemned as cowardice or sensuality any respite that nature cried out for. All of them, encouraged by the words of their guide and inspired by his example, made superhuman efforts to follow in his footsteps and to yield to the attractions of grace. Thus, in a short while, they undermined and ruined

their health, whether by following their ardent desires, by the intensity of their application to the interior life, by the practice of unrelenting mortification, or by the immoderate use they made of disciplines and other instruments of penance combined with their daily round of exhausting work in the schools.

In seeking to follow their Founder, the Brothers did not pay attention to the fact that he did not walk, did not even run, but flew in the narrow and thorny path leading to heaven. He was a man especially favored by grace, a true Benjamin, to whom the new Joseph, our Savior, gave a tenfold portion when distributing the gifts of grace. His measure of it was full, abundant, overflowing. The great sacrifices he had made for God, the astonishing violence he had offered his nature, and the heroic deeds of humility, renunciation, and charity toward the poor had opened for him the floodgates of God's benedictions. We can say that his lot was to receive the grace of victory and that—thanks to it and with its help—everything became not only possible for him but feasible and easy. The amazing thing is that the penance he practiced, which exceeded what any of the Brothers did, far from ruining his health, seemed to fortify it and make his constitution more robust. In seeking to imitate him, they should have consulted their capability, but this they failed to do. Vying with a spiritual giant, they reached their limits in a short time, but at least they had the consolation of having done all they could to resemble him, and they died like saints after living like great penitents.

## Exemplary death of Brother Jean-François

Brother Jean-François[2] was the one who led the way to heaven. A good job in the city had amply provided for his needs, and we can say that when he left it behind, he was leaving much in the eyes of him who gauges the merit of our actions only according to the share that our hearts take in them. When he resigned his position, he abandoned more than the Apostles did when they followed Jesus Christ. They were only poor fishermen who had nothing to forsake but their nets, but since they renounced them with all their hearts, their sacrifice had great value in the eyes of Jesus Christ, who addressed to them the highest praise and promised them the richest rewards. In

2. For information and documentation on the life of Brother Jean-François and the approximately 250 Brothers who joined the Institute during De La Salle's lifetime, see Augustine Loes, *The First De La Salle Brothers; 1681–1719* (Landover: Lasallian Publications, 1999).

addition, as Saint Jerome and Saint Gregory observe, Our Lord's disciples left much in leaving behind the little they possessed, because they also gave up the desire of owning anything. It was this attitude, so agreeable to him who takes into consideration the sentiments of the heart, which merited so many graces for Brother Jean-François. What won him over to God and led him to enter the new Community was the example of the lives of the Brothers. Impressed by their piety, fervor, and patience, he realized that the one who directed them was indeed a great servant of God, and he conceived a holy desire of putting himself under his guidance and of belonging to his Community. He lived only a short time after this, but the manner in which he lived has left his memory in benediction. His days were indeed full, and his great concern was to give them all their entire measure of merit. A deep interior spirit characterized his piety. Always recollected, attentive to God's holy presence, vigilant over all the movements of his soul, careful to suppress all useless thoughts and irrelevant affections, watchful to eliminate the slightest movements of his passions and vices, on the alert to mortify his natural inclinations and his self-will, Jean-François let nothing enter his heart but that which was from God and for God. Exclusively occupied in cultivating the interior life, he so badly weakened the exterior man that after eighteen months of community living, he reached the end of his days. But as Holy Scripture says, he had lived a long time since he had lived with great fervor. His days, so full of merit, counted for years before the Lord. *Explevit tempora multa.* He did not need to live any longer, since he had reached the goal to which a long life should lead: perfect charity.

The power that this virtue exercised over his soul showed itself during the severe illness which, in 1684, brought him to the grave within a few days. The delirium resulting from the high fever which consumed him and which preceded his death for some days was not marked by any extravagance, any irregular movements, or any ill-considered words. I can even affirm that this delirium was edifying, mirroring as it did his beautiful soul. It revealed the deep impressions that divine love had made in it. Dare I say it? His delirium was like a sort of ecstasy during which his heart was filled only with a longing for heaven and with transports of love for God. These words—*Oh beautiful eternity! How lovely is thy dwelling place, Oh Lord! Oh love, love, love! We shall go to see love, love, love!*—these words, I say, were constantly on his lips. He repeated them often in a pleasant voice with all the strength he had left, and he expired as he finished pronouncing them. His death was as saintly as his life had been.

## Holy death of Brother Bourlette; his eminent virtue

Brother Bourlette was the second of these martyrs of penance. Excessive fervor soon brought him to the tomb. He was a native of Reims, the son of respectable parents, adequately provided with all the goods of fortune. Dear to his family, he lacked nothing in a home where affection reigned. The future smiled on him; everything seemed to offer him pleasing prospects, as the world judges. His family inheritance promised him the means of establishing himself and the hope of being very happy in the world. Touched by God's grace, he lifted his eyes to a higher goal in heaven. Whatever was mortal seemed to him unworthy of an immortal soul. His family home held no charm for him, because he felt too much at ease there. The Brothers' house—where everything was lacking and on entering which he might have said that he was shutting his body up in a prison, consigning his senses to torture and his will to entombment—appeared to him as truly the house of God and the gate of heaven.

On what occasion, for what reason and purpose, did he join the Brothers? How? He entered without the knowledge of his parents. He remained deaf to their pleas and entreaties and persevered in spite of their tears and constant efforts to make him leave. The eminent virtue of De La Salle and of his disciples had given rise to his vocation. The desire of walking in the straight path which leads to paradise was the motive which drew him to a house which he considered as the narrow door giving entrance into heaven. He lived there like an angel and died there like a saint.

What surprised him at first, touched him, and won him over to God was De La Salle's unconquerable patience and that of his children. As a citizen of Reims, he could not be ignorant of who this man was whom he saw so poor, reduced to such circumstances, so heartily despised by all. Comparing the original status of the servant of God, a situation of wealth and honor, with the second that he had willingly embraced, a state of poverty, mortification, and ignominy, Bourlette could not sufficiently admire the action of grace in human hearts. He was constantly amazed at seeing a man who had given up so much, who had become so vile in the world's eyes, yet happy and full of joy over the fortunate exchange he had made by giving up his wealth for poverty and his comfortable life for one that crucified the flesh.

What struck him most was to see this man of God made a sight for the vile rabble that mocked him, some of whom seemed to be saying to the others, *Ecce homo; Behold the man!* Behold him, this

canon, this doctor, this scion of a great family, who has become a schoolmaster! That is the role he has taken up. Let him live with it, because he now owns nothing; he is as poor as those whom he teaches. Isn't he a sight! Clad in that outfit, dressed in a capote, with those heavy shoes and that hat with the wide brim hanging over his shoulders! What credit does he now bring to his city, his family, his former colleagues in the cathedral chapter? What brilliant part does he now play in the world? Can he have lost his reason? He must have, for he only shows himself as one who is dead and who cares nothing about what anybody does to him!

The young man, who had one day seen De La Salle reduced to being the plaything of the people, saw some of his disciples treated in the same way the next. The insolent riffraff that gathered around them sought to amuse themselves at their expense. He saw that they were insulted with impunity, that they allowed their tormentors full liberty to mock them, to tug on their clothes, to shove them rudely, to splash them with mud, to strike them, chase them, and throw stones at them. And amidst all this, they did not seem to be upset, nor did they let a single word of indignation, not a sign of impatience, escape their lips. This edified him extremely—these quiet, modest, mild, and peaceable men surrounded by a pack of unruly children who, as Scripture says, ran after them like wild dogs, barking and seeking an opportunity to harass them. These truly patient men, in the midst of this fanatical mob which drew near to them only to strike them, seemed to him men formed in the school of Calvary and modeled after Jesus Christ, their exemplar. When all was said and done, he thought, they deserved envy rather than pity.

The admiration Bourlette conceived for the Brothers inspired him with the desire of becoming like them, so that after drinking of this same chalice on earth with them, he might be found worthy of a place in their company in heaven. Once he had made this generous resolution, he carried it out without letting his parents know. Desolate and afflicted, they were filled with consternation when they found out the truth. They hastened to come to deliver him from a house which, as the world judges, devoured its inhabitants and was the object of so much public hatred and persecution.

The more they loved this child of theirs, the more they wept to see him in a place so horrible in the eyes of the world. If death had taken him from them, they would probably not have shed as many tears at his grave as they now did. They felt disgraced because their son was among the Brothers. To wipe away this stain from their family honor, there was nothing they did not try in order to make him

leave. But they might have been speaking to a deaf and blind person; he seemed not to see their tears or to hear their sighs. Their lamentations and complaints found him and left him as immovable as a cliff battered by the waves, which is immovable by the ocean tide breaking over its base. When this generous youth entered the house, he could have said with Saint Paul, *I no longer listened to flesh and blood.* His eagerness to belong entirely to Jesus Christ made him forget that he had any parents; when they came to tempt him to abandon his vocation, he seemed not to recognize them any more. His heart secretly told them what his lips, out of respect, dared not utter: *I know you not.* "I no longer recognize you as my father and mother when you try to tear me away from the bosom of my heavenly Father." Thus armed with the sword of the Gospel, he accomplished this separation, painful as it was to nature, and gave up parents who loved him tenderly.

Perfect charity, that Gospel pearl which must be bought at the price of renouncing all else, that refined gold which makes its possessor so rich and which demands the greatest sacrifices, was the reward given to this virtuous young man for what he had just done. Indeed, it seems that the love of God, which costs even generous hearts so much, was bestowed on him on the threshold of the house when he came to beg entry there. From that moment on, his heart was so fully inflamed with love that it no longer beat save for God. It can be said that this sacred love pursued him everywhere and overwhelmed him. Its assaults were impetuous and continual, so that he seemed at all times to be in ecstasy and out of touch with his surroundings, especially during interior prayer and thanksgiving after Holy Communion. At such times, he seemed to experience convulsive movements or to be seized by a violent fever which caused his limbs to tremble. When he was warned and reproved because of this singular behavior, he seemed quite surprised, because he alone was ignorant of what all the others could see.

Furthermore, to judge correctly the ardor of his love, we should measure it by his attraction for humiliations. A sincere desire for self-abasement gave his love for God the genuine authentication it needed to certify its reality. The latter can always be suspected as regards its genuineness or its purity when the former is not present to vouch for it, for nothing so evidently proves that self-love has been eradicated than a strong yearning for humiliations. Any other sign might be questioned; no other can guarantee the presence of the pure love of God in a soul. Only he should be numbered among the perfect who displays love for the cross as the effective proof of his love for God.

By this standard, Brother Bourlette deserves a place among the perfect, since no other inclination appeared so strongly in him than his desire for self-abasement. His entire ambition was to lower himself in the estimation of men and to forfeit their good opinion of him. If his spirit of obedience had not been stronger than his thirst for humiliation, he might have been seen pretending to be insane so as to excite the rabble and the street urchins to throw stones at him and splatter him with mud. On more than one occasion, De La Salle had to call on all his firmness and authority to restrain him within the limits of prudence. This lover of contempt insistently begged permission to run about in the streets of his native city and under the eyes of his parents, friends, and fellow citizens, clad in a red pourpoint[3]and wearing a woolen cap on his head, hoping to force people to treat him as the demented were treated and to look upon him as such.

His parents, heartbroken at having lost him and at seeing him in a house with such a reputation, kept returning to urge him to leave it. Because they did not cease importuning and wearying him with their tears, reproaches, caresses, and other signs of tenderness—weapons so often victorious even over the most inflexible hearts—De La Salle sent him to Rethel to get him away from them, hoping by thus separating him from them to put him out of reach of the importunities. But what does natural love not inspire? His father and mother, whether from nearby or from far off, did not slacken their efforts. Like bears robbed of their cub, they hastened to the place to which their son had been exiled in the hope of protecting him from their pursuits. At Rethel, as at Reims, they besieged him with cries, lamentations, and reproaches without succeeding in causing their own emotion to gain his heart. In vain did they weep and appear inconsolable before him. In vain did they mingle tears with their pleas and reproaches with their caresses; they found him ever the same: unmoved by their tears, their cries, and the heartbreak of those who had given him life. Entirely enrapt in God, he let grace in his heart overcome nature. As a victim on that interior altar, he offered to the heavenly Father his own natural love, the sorrow he was causing his parents, and that which they caused him. Relating this new temptation to De La Salle in a letter, he said, *My parents came to see me and asked if I was not at last ready to be converted. I told them that I was converted already.* I do not know whether it was for the purpose of keeping Brother Bourlette's residence a secret from his parents, but at all events, he was changed again, from Rethel to Laon; however, nothing was gained by it.

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3. A pourpoint was a sort of sweater or blouse with puffed-out sleeves.

When his father found out where his son had gone, he lost no time in proceeding thither and in trying to induce him to leave a state where he could not bear to see him. Once again, the son, dry-eyed, saw the tears flow unchecked from his father's eyes. How many sobs and wails beat against his ears without being able to reach his heart? What new testimonials of affection did he not receive? What bitter reproaches was he not obliged to listen to on the part of the grieving old man, sunk in consternation and almost in despair? These importunities which assailed him with such fury did not, however, succeed in breaking down his resolution. They merely served to steel him in his vocation and to sanctify him by giving him repeated opportunities to renew the greatest natural sacrifice he could make.

The reward of all this constancy was not long in coming. Whether God wished to grant him his crown without further delay after he had withstood so many combats or whether his great fervor shortened his life, the fact is that after about two years of a truly saintly life, he met with a happy death. If charity was not its sole cause, it certainly seems to have been the occasion that brought it about. Here is what happened.

When Brother Bourlette's companion fell ill, the generous young Brother undertook to care for him while keeping the two classes in session and doing the work of three men. Fervor never thinks anything is too much; when doing too much, it still accuses itself of slackness. The parish priest, still living today as a canon of the cathedral, came to visit the Brothers. He loved Brother Bourlette on account of his extraordinary piety and found him overburdened and in danger of succumbing under the load of all the work he was doing. He suggested giving the students a week or two of vacation, but the humble Brother said that in conscience he could not do this without a written order from De La Salle. The charitable pastor, foreseeing the results of this misplaced fervor and ill-founded scruple about obedience, was rather displeased by the Brother's resolve. To make him realize that the situation was more than he could handle, he asked him how, all by himself, he could teach two separate classes containing such a large number of students while still taking care of the sick Brother. *Monsieur*, replied Brother Bourlette, *I keep my right foot in one class, my left foot in the other; my mind is with the sick Brother, and my heart is in heaven.* This reply amazed the pious parish priest but left him with nothing more to say. He departed edified and full of admiration.

A few days later, the sick Brother was well enough to handle his class once more, but Brother Bourlette was obliged to leave his and

go to bed. A continual and raging fever carried him off in the year 1686, in spite of the doctors and the medicines, for they failed either to give him any relief or to prolong his life. The entire parish, indeed the entire city, displayed overwhelming grief. His death was a great loss, and people honored him as a saint. During several years, pilgrims frequently visited his grave to honor him and pray to him. Many persons came to offer their prayers there and to invoke the pious young Brother. His tranquillity of soul and his modesty, which were so obvious in all his external behavior, had won for him the nickname of Brother Modesty. People called him by no other, and by thus designating him, they thought they had characterized his virtue and given him deserved praise.

## Death of Brother Maurice; his characteristic virtue

Brother Maurice, another native of Reims, was the third of De La Salle's children to enjoy his reward in heaven. His happy death occurred in Reims on 1 May 1687. He was born of a very distinguished family and paid it even more honor by his great piety than he had received from it by his birth. No sooner had he joined the Brothers than all looked upon him as their model. Everything in him spoke of God and turned people to God, inspiring devotion in their hearts. This good Brother seemed to be a reincarnation of Jesus Christ; in his person he provided others with a striking image of Our Lord during his life on this earth. Even in his silence, his example spoke, and he instructed others by giving to each of his actions its fullest perfection. Thus, all through his life and especially at its conclusion, we might apply to him, in due proportion, this magnificent commendation that the people gave to Jesus Christ himself: *He has done all things well.*

This was true especially of his interior prayer. The recollected posture he maintained, the religious spirit which seemed to envelop him, and the great devotion which his face manifested made him resemble a seraph. All during this holy exercise, he remained so interiorly occupied, so taken up with God, that he seemed to be in heaven. He was so oblivious of all sense impressions that he was not tempted to satisfy them even in the least. In him, nature no longer dared to manifest its preferences; however timidly they appeared, he immediately contradicted them, mortified them, and pursued them until he had entirely destroyed them.

Natural inclination and self-will enjoyed even less liberty in his life. The mere mention of such things inspired him with horror, and it can be said that he had succeeded in exterminating them in himself.

Perfect obedience, which Saint John Climacus calls the tomb of self-will, was the virtue which seemed to predominate in this Brother. It led his Superior to show him a sort of special predilection. De La Salle had a particular love for this perfectly obedient Brother and preferred him to serve his Mass. Brother Maurice served Mass with so much modesty and piety that those present might have thought they beheld an angel serving a seraph at the altar.

His delicate constitution could not long survive the austere and mortified life which the Brothers led. Regretfully, they could see that he was growing weaker and becoming tubercular. Once the malady declared itself, it made rapid progress. The fire of divine love which consumed him interiorly contributed even more than the hard and penitential life he led to weakening and ulcerating his lungs. Nor should anyone be surprised at this. When this little Community began, grace was poured out so obviously and in such abundance on its members, as well as on its leader, that although none of them had gone through the exercises of the novitiate—which was not established until 1691—the Brothers in a short time became what they needed to be: spiritual men.

Brother Maurice was one of those most in need of a bridle, rather than a spur, as he advanced on the way to God. His fervor carried him away, and he took neither his health nor his strength into consideration. It is not surprising that he soon found himself exhausted, and the end was not slow in coming. This good Brother, like the others, forgot that he had a body, and while trying to live as though he were a pure spirit, he failed to realize that our infirm and mortal flesh has its exigencies. He hastened toward the end common to us all and found a tomb in the house which he had recently entered.

De La Salle, disconsolate over the prospect of losing such a valuable recruit, tried everything to re-establish his health and that of another Brother who was suffering from the same malady. The doctor who examined them felt that the only measure that could prolong their lives was for them to leave a house which gave everything to the spirit and nothing to the body. He judged that the company and example of De La Salle and of the Brothers were eminently calculated to make saints but not to cure the sick. Indeed, the fervor of the father and that of his children increased day by day, and the more it grew, the less attention was paid among them to the body and its needs. The spirit of grace strove with the spirit of the flesh, above all, and sought only to curb it.

The ordinary physician of the community, Doctor Dubois, believed that a house where nature found only martyrdom would soon

become the grave of these two Brothers if they remained there, and therefore he gave them no other advice than to leave it if they wished to recover from their illness and shorten their agony. This advice was not to the liking of Brother Maurice. Fearing that by leaving the Community he might lose the spirit of grace he had received when he entered it, he resolved to stay there and die. The sacrifice of a premature death seemed to him less bitter than to leave a community where the spirit of God reigned and where the happiness his soul enjoyed surpassed the torments that his body endured.

De La Salle, charmed by this generous resolve, consented to it with joy, and it was for him a source of great happiness to keep with him for six more months such a perfect example of patience, humility, obedience, resignation, and fervor. Although a prey to great sufferings, the young man sought to assuage them only by continual recourse to God and aspirations toward heaven, which held the object of all his desires. His edifying death took place on the last day of April 1687; he was twenty-two years old. The other Brother who also suffered from tuberculosis did not show a similar determination. He immediately accepted the offer to return home but soon repented of having done so. His family home, which deprived him of such great examples of virtue, did not restore his health. He died there three months after leaving the Brothers, filled with bitter remorse over having abandoned the land of the saints. On his deathbed, when he saw his poor mother weeping over him, his regret at not being any longer under the guidance of De La Salle and in the company of the Brothers became even more cruel and hard to bear. *Ah*, he replied to his disconsolate mother, *you break my heart. If I had remained among the Brothers, instead of hearing wails, I would be listening to nothing but prayers.*

The other Brothers who went to make up the new colony that the house of the Brothers established in heaven were all like those we have just spoken of. They also died in Reims at an early age with great resignation to God's will and evident signs of the joy they felt at offering the sacrifice of their lives to God and at leaving this earth to go to heaven. The parish priest who gave them the last sacraments was in constant admiration as he saw these young Brothers so indifferent toward life and so ready for the journey to eternity. That was the testimony he gave one day to the father and to his children in the presence of several ecclesiastics who seemed to be finding fault with De La Salle for sending such young Brothers into the classroom. "I do not know," he told them, "whom I should admire most, De La Salle or his Brothers. I have already assisted a number of them on their

deathbeds and given them the last sacraments. They amazed me; I have never seen anybody, even octogenarians, die with as much courage and resignation as these young Brothers." His words carried conviction, because he was an elderly man who had been engaged in the pastoral ministry for some thirty years.

De La Salle spared no pains to afford relief to his sick Brothers and to help them recover their health, but when it pleased God to call one of them, his calm and joyful attitude showed that he felt sure of their happiness. He knew them through and through; nothing within them was hidden from him. He was persuaded, without any special revelation but merely on the basis of faith, that such pure souls and hearts so devoted to God had certainly been taken up into union with the sovereign Good and had already entered into the possession of their last end, or at least they were not to be separated therefrom for very long. This good father was happy at having such children. At their death, he shed no tears but refrained from sighs and lamentations, whether he was present or whether news of their deaths was brought to him. Thanksgiving was the only tribute the Founder owed them, and this he paid without delay. *Let us give thanks to God*, he would say, *since one more of our Brothers has gone to heaven.*

## Chapter V

*New signs of fervor in De La Salle; he conceives the idea of giving up his position as Superior and having a Brother replace him; through a pious artifice, he wins the consent of the Brothers; he gives admirable examples of humility and obedience after he resigns his office; having been reinstated in his rightful position by the vicars-general, he gives himself over to his attraction for penance.*

Before De La Salle had to take charge of the schools outside Reims, he was able to enjoy at will the delights of solitude and of repose in God. Freed from distracting cares or multiple concerns, he could concentrate on recollection without being disturbed or obliged to leave his solitude in order to occupy himself with business affairs which, no matter how holy, are always a burden to interior souls, because they withdraw them from union with God. The community house in Reims was for him a true desert, where he successfully hid himself

and remained unavailable to everyone except the Brothers. He left the house and appeared in public only to seek the world's scorn.

The fervor that reigned in the house kept all of the Brothers faithful to their duties. The deep silence, inner recollection, and perfect obedience that they displayed afforded him much leisure time to devote to interior prayer and liberty to think only of God. In fact, his fervent disciples had a secret Superior in their hearts who directed them in all they did, and on the outside, they had a rule which governed all their actions and every step they took. Consequently, De La Salle found that the management of the house was not a source of distraction for him. All he needed to do was to preside over the Brothers' exercises of piety, once they came home from school. When they left for class again, their absence once more gave him the opportunity to occupy himself with God in silence and solitude in the depths of his heart. Thus, in one way or another, he kept up his conversation with God. His manner of praying varied, but it was continual. Hidden in his tiny cell, he emerged from it only to be present at the community exercises, and he left these only to plunge once again into contemplation.

But when the number of schools and of Brothers increased, problems and administrative details requiring the Founder's attention likewise multiplied and demanded a part of the time he had hitherto devoted to God alone. How he regretted having to mingle Martha's cares with Mary's repose! What annoyance he experienced at having to interrupt his intimate union with the sovereign Good! But God's will is the only law that pure souls recognize. They seek his will, not their own satisfaction. With that attitude, De La Salle willingly gave up God for God's sake and gladly deprived himself of those delights with which the Divine Spouse favors holy souls when they walk alone with him, in order to devote himself to his duties and to go where the divine will called him. Still, he was careful to accord to the duties of his state only the time that was strictly necessary. He spent all the rest in interior prayer and never wasted any of it in dealing with creatures.

Miserly with his time, he used it wisely in order to occupy as much of it as possible in prayer. For this reason, he kept himself even more secluded than before and made it a duty for himself to live on this earth as though alone there with God, forgetting that other men even existed. In vain did those who had not completely dropped their former relationships with him reproach him with having become too unsociable or indifferent in their regard. In vain did some souls truly beloved by God, who alone amidst all the scorn heaped on him had kept on paying him his just due and esteeming him at his proper

worth, seek to approach him and to profit by his lights. De La Salle remained inflexible in his resolve to see nobody and to admit no visitors to see him, following this rule given by the author of *The Imitation of Christ*: *The greatest saints avoided, as much as they could, the company of men and chose to think only of God in secret.*[4] Still, as we mentioned before, when he was taken by surprise or when, in spite of himself, he was obliged to come forth to show that he was still among the living, he was found to be what he had always been by character and education: polite and gracious, exemplifying the joy of the saints on his countenance.

It was thus that the abbot of Saint Thierry met him one day. The abbey, belonging to the Order of Saint Benedict, lies about two leagues from Reims. The accounts he had heard all over Champagne about De La Salle and his new Institute stirred the abbot's curiosity and brought him to Reims to see whether everything he had heard about the man of God was true and whether his own experience would not gainsay at least some of it. When he reached the Brothers' house with all his retinue, the noise of his arrival made De La Salle aware of his visitor, and he came down at once to receive him. On seeing him, the abbot recognized him for what he had always been: pleasant and courteous as usual but clothed very differently. After looking him over from head to foot, he took him by the arm and with a laugh asked him, *Is this how a man of your character should be dressed?* De La Salle's reply was a smile and a courtly bow. That was the only answer he ever gave to such remarks. After a long conversation with him, the abbot left filled with admiration and esteem for a man whose worth the city of Reims refused to recognize, just as it failed to realize how lucky it was to have him as a native son and to number him among its inhabitants.

No matter how carefully our hermit strove to avoid people, he could not entirely escape their unforeseen visits. The canons of the cathedral, whether in order to be edified or to satisfy their curiosity and to see with their own eyes what their former companion looked like now among his disciples, frequently came to call on him, much to his displeasure but much to their own edification and profit. They beheld with their own eyes a member of their company reviving those great examples of humility, poverty, mortification, detachment, recollection, and other virtues which the Christians of these later centuries admire in those of the first. Whatever they had expected, they could not complain that his piety had made him less polished or

4. Book 1, chap. 20.

more indifferent to them. They found in him the same good heart, the same courtesy, and the same display of friendship. He did not even show the ennui they occasioned him by thus coming to distract him.

## He seeks solitude with the Carmelites some distance from Rouen

Yet his displeasure was considerable, and it was perhaps to avoid it that he thought of going to make a retreat in one of the retreat houses belonging to the Carmelite Fathers. He did this in 1686 in such great secrecy that not even his children knew where he was. The only precaution he took to make sure he could be called back, if something out of the ordinary happened during his absence, was to inform the Brother whom he left in charge of the house in Reims where to write to him. He left him an address, but even this did not reveal his secret, because it was an indirect one which did not indicate how a letter posted to an abbess in Rouen would eventually reach him.

This precaution De La Salle took was wise, because in fact it became necessary to call him back soon on account of the illness of the two Brothers in Laon, which happened about this time. As soon as the Brother who was taking De La Salle's place in Reims heard of this, he set out to visit the two stricken men who needed his help and presence. However, in spite of his diligence, he did not get there soon enough and had barely time to see one of them die after having received the last anointing. This made him resolve to inform De La Salle at once and to let him know that his presence was absolutely necessary for his little flock.

## He abandons his solitude to visit a sick Brother at Laon

For the improvised hermit, this was bad news indeed, because it made him give up his retreat in a delightful spot where nothing interrupted his communing with God and because it informed him of the death of one of his best subjects and the serious illness of another. De La Salle did not let this news upset him; the most annoying and unforeseen incidents found him and left him perfectly calm. He was, nevertheless, obliged to leave right away for Laon, and everyone was much surprised to see him arrive there only three days after getting the news. All were even more surprised to see him obey the call of a young Brother of twenty-four so promptly and at the cost of so much fatigue.

After consulting about what should be done, he gave the students vacation for two months. Then, without giving any rest to his

body, worn out and exhausted from the fatigue of such a painful journey, he set out for Reims accompanied by the Brother who had sent for him. They walked on through the night, as he usually did. De La Salle ate nothing but a crust of bread and drank a glass of wine before midnight in a village four leagues from Reims. When they reached the city early in the morning, he immediately sent to bed the Brother who had accompanied him, while he himself went to pray. The fact is that interior prayer had more attraction for him than sleep, and since it was time for the community to engage in it, he could not deny himself this gratification. To his soul he granted the repose which it sought, without paying attention to his body, so weary from such a long trip made at night, on foot, and almost fasting. His body was only asking for justice when it pleaded for a few hours' sleep.

If the repose he found in interior prayer was so delightful for De La Salle, the satisfaction he found in true obedience was no less appealing. He had made a vow of obedience, as we mentioned previously, and had done so with a firm determination to carry it out for the sake of good example to be given to the Brothers as well as for his personal spiritual advantage. But how could he put this vow into practice? His position as the Superior gave him the right to command, thus placing obedience beyond his reach. Hence, to put his vow into practice and to satisfy his humility, he needed to give up his position and lay aside his authority as Superior. But who could take his place? Whom could he choose as the new Superior? Whom could he obey without demeaning his priestly character? The Community included no other priest. Most of the Brothers were men of little learning or education. Was it fitting that a priest, a doctor, a former canon, a director, and a Superior should step aside and place over himself a simple Brother lacking any qualifications or special attainments?

Christian humility leads people to seek the depths of abasement, but could he place himself at the feet of a layman clad in a black robe and ask him for permissions without abasing his sacerdotal character, without discrediting his ministry, without dishonoring his person? Something in this manner of acting seemed somehow improper. Would it not have been carrying humility too far and listening to his own inclinations at the expense of wisdom and prudence? De La Salle could hardly have been ignorant of this. This difficulty had given him pause, and it took him a long time to try to resolve it.

After all, perfect virtue does not lay much store by such reasoning. Faith alone guides it and leads it blindly on the path trodden by Jesus Christ. A higher illumination teaches it that it cannot do better than to heed the lessons given us by divine wisdom and to follow his

example. In the Man-God kneeling before Saint Peter, the Apostles, and even Judas, washing their feet and wiping them with his own hands and kissing them with his sacred lips, the humble Superior found the solution for his dilemma. The more he contemplated the life and death of Jesus, the more he felt he should reproach himself with having listened to human reasoning. Everything he read in the Gospel, in the life of the Lord of the universe, gave examples of submission and dependence. There is not one of the Lord's mysteries that does not afford us some instance of a particular kind of obedience. Subject to the laws of nature, he remained for nine months in his mother's womb, without trying to hasten the moment of his birth. Submission to the orders of the Emperor Augustus brought him to Bethlehem, where he was born. Although his condition as the Son of God, his title as Savior, the purity of his conception, and the privileges of his birth exempted him from the shameful and painful rite of circumcision, Jesus made it a duty to endure its rigor and abasement. The same spirit of obedience to the Law brought him to the temple to be offered to God. All we know of the first thirty years of his life is that he was subject to Mary and Joseph. And he ended his life as he had begun it, by obedience, of which he gave us a perfect example on the cross.

In all these instances of obedience practiced by God, the humble Superior found the solution to his difficulties, and he reproached himself for having deluded himself by listening to arguments of mere human propriety which the Gospel does not approve of and which the example of Christ refutes. His longing for retirement and pure uninterrupted prayer, added to his desire of humbling himself and of obeying, led him to divest himself of his title as Superior. As the number of Brothers increased, along with that of the schools, his cares and occupations were multiplied, thus robbing him of part of the time that his heart wished to devote fully to communing with God. If he became a mere private individual again, he would find it easy to give himself up unreservedly to a life of humiliation, of abnegation of his own will, and of thinking only of God, thus beginning on earth the life proper to heaven, where our sole activity will be to contemplate and to love the sovereign Beauty.

In order to bring the Brothers to accept his resignation, the Founder needed reasons. What reasons could he invoke? Here again he found himself in difficulty. If he gave his true motives, he would have betrayed his humility; if he tried to invent specious ones, he would have betrayed the truth. What could he do? Not wishing to offend against either virtue, he focused on all the appearances which

might be taken for sound arguments by men not especially gifted with discernment. He tried to show them that the best interests of the Community required that someone else take over its direction. His efforts were not in vain, for he succeeded in winning them over to his proposal. So plausibly did he put forth his unconvincing reasons that these good Brothers were either really persuaded, did not dare to contradict him, or did not want to disappoint him, and so they finally agreed to what he proposed.

In addition, the humble Superior, in view of getting his disciples to go along with what he wanted, had taken all the necessary dispositions to make his withdrawal seem to be God's will. Such behavior should not surprise us. If self-love is very clever at deceiving others, humility is no less ingenious in advancing its own ends. The most effective means he could use to make all the Brothers accept his abdication was to gather them together and to explain to them the reasons for his resignation. Then he had them meditate on this before God. Next he asked them to express their opinion and artfully insinuated his own, in such a way that they might feel that the force of the argument compelled them to follow it. He did not ask for a vote until he saw they were won over. In addition, to give their decision even greater weight, it should be arrived at during a retreat, because at such times reason guided by faith is more clearly enlightened. God's will is perceived more plainly, and grace is more abundantly given.

## He persuades the Brothers to elect one of their own as Superior

Hence, after calling his disciples together and beginning a retreat with them, he explained what he had in mind and addressed them in a touching exhortation, bordering on the pathetic, to sway them all the more. He left out nothing that could add to the weight of his arguments, which really were no more convincing than the humility that inspired them.

He reminded them that the additional number of schools had also increased his administrative concerns and required men capable of directing these schools properly. All alone, he could no longer face up to so much business; hearing the Brothers' confessions and directing their consciences were important matters quite sufficient to take up all his time. Among their number, there were several outstanding Brothers who were wise, prudent, virtuous, and capable of assuming the responsibility of governing the Community. It was, therefore, incumbent on them to choose someone to take his place, since the good of the Institute required that it be led by one of them.

He added that it was necessary at least to try out this scheme and that the time for doing so had come and should not be passed up. Sooner or later, it would become necessary to take this step, since he himself would not live forever, and it was preferable to do while he still lived what would become absolutely necessary after his death. The new Superior could acquire experience under the Founder's eyes and be advised by him. He offered to act as the coadjutor or vicar of the newly elected man and to initiate him into his new functions so as to make it easier for him to exercise them. Nature itself, he insisted, made it plain that every society should be ruled by one who was like the other members and that Brothers should obey a Brother; having him, a priest, at their head constituted an anomaly. It was in every way preferable that they should have a Superior like themselves. Finally, he felt himself called to a life of retirement and detachment from creatures; he noted that he could not reconcile his duty of attending to so much business with his application to interior prayer and the cultivation of the interior life. The Founder wished to get them used to doing without him and to accustom them to obey another Brother.

All these seemed like excellent arguments inspired by humility but exclusively aimed at favoring De La Salle's virtue and at giving him more liberty to put himself in the lowest place. Under careful scrutiny, however, they appeared more fictitious than real. Once stripped of their ostensible plausibility, their hollowness became obvious. Indeed, if the Brothers had taken up each of the contentions that their humble Superior so artfully advanced, they could have used them to convince him that the best interests of the Institute demanded that he remain in the position he occupied and that if they listened to the pleading of his humility, they would inflict on the Community a wound that his charity would seek to spare it.

They could have told him that he was their father and they his children and that such reciprocal relationships cannot be nullified. Nature itself required that he should be their Superior and they his inferiors. The head should rule over the body, as we can see by the place that nature itself assigns to it. Order would be subverted if the feet were set where the head ought to be, and vice versa. He could conclude from this example that his humility was going to introduce disorder into the Community if he was ever seen at the feet of a Brother, taking orders from him and obeying him. They could have observed that since he was their shepherd, it was his duty to lead his sheep; it would be ridiculous for a sheep to conduct the shepherd; consequently, they could not accept his humble request without exposing their little Community to certain ruin.

Since it was his work, only his hand which had begun it could bring it to its full development according to the normal order of Providence. De La Salle was their Founder, guide, father, and patriarch. As such, he had the charisms needed to govern them; these were gifts granted to him personally which could not be shared with another.

These reflections were powerful and impressive arguments which demolished the specious ones that De La Salle tried to put forward. He himself would have been the first to recognize their cogency, if his humility had not prevented him from doing so. Comparing the one set of motives with the other, he could not have even considered resigning, and it should have been easy for him to conclude that charity should prevail over his attraction for interior prayer and a life of dependence. Be that as it may, either the Brothers did not entertain the reflections, or, if any of them did, they did not venture to bring them forward. All of them were much surprised when their father revealed his project to them; they fell silent and apparently gave up the use of their reason. Perhaps on this occasion they did not possess sufficient understanding, or else they failed to show enough resoluteness.

Whatever the reality, the Brothers took under consideration a proposal which they should have turned down with respectful but humble insistence. Since De La Salle was so eager to practice obedience, they should all have acted together and commanded him to stay in his place while leaving them in theirs. This was the only pledge they should have exacted from him in the name of the obedience he wanted to exercise, but this they did not do. All these good Brothers, extremely edified by this new proof of virtue that De La Salle was giving them, consented to his abdication and resolved to choose another Superior, thus giving to one of the children the authority belonging to the father and making the father depend on the child. They agreed to put the head in the place of the feet and to choose a member to govern the head, to put a simple Brother above a priest and a priest at the feet of a Brother, to make the confessor and director subordinate to his penitent, and to establish the penitent as the guide of his director and the censor of his confessor. They allowed themselves to be convinced by reasons that nothing but their Founder's humility made plausible. It is true that he went about it in such a way as to make them believe what he said and go along with what he wanted, for he told them, in the end, that they should no longer think of him. By showing them how necessary it was for them to choose another Superior, he really made it an obligation for them to do so.

## The election of Brother L'Heureux

He got what he wanted. An election was held, and the choice fell on Brother Henri L'Heureux. This selection was much to the liking of De La Salle and met with his full approval and commendation. Brother Henri L'Heureux possessed notable qualities; it was he whom De La Salle had hoped to see in his place and whom he would have picked as his successor. He was wise, moderate, humble, and solidly virtuous. He seemed indeed capable of governing the little Community at any time other than at its beginning, when the father who had founded it was still living. If De La Salle had no longer been in this world, Brother Henri was the one best qualified to replace him, but the Institute at this time was like an edifice barely rising out of the ground. Its builder was necessary to construct it properly and establish it firmly. Any other hand was not the one that God had chosen to erect it and bring it to its completion.

The many qualities of the new Superior won for him as much esteem and confidence as the Brothers could have displayed toward anyone other than their beloved father. De La Salle was the first to show Brother Henri proper marks of respect, submission, and dependence. He immediately forgot who he was and acted only according to the orders of the new Superior. He showed himself scrupulously exact in paying him the reverence due from an inferior, so much so, that he became a real source of confusion for Brother Henri while winning for himself the admiration of the Community.

## Admirable obedience of De La Salle to the new Superior

Entirely happy, De La Salle finally saw himself fully free to yield to his humility everything it asked for. Each day was marked by fresh examples of submission and dependence. In the lives of the saints, which contain so many instances of this sort of conduct, we can hardly find anything that he failed to practice. He proceeded from an act of humility to one of obedience, and if anyone had followed him throughout the day, he would have seen him making an uninterrupted series of them. In fact, I do not know whether in observing him attentively, we could have surprised him not actually exercising either interior prayer, penance, humility, or obedience. Morning and evening, on entering or on leaving the refectory, he accused himself of his faults in the posture and with the devotion of a humble penitent, and the faults he reproached himself with were, if I may so call them, sins of edification.

Whatever was most lowly, most demeaning, most distasteful in the household chores was what he preferred, and he managed to choose these tasks or to have them assigned to him. Sweeping, washing dishes, carrying out the garbage, and cleaning the toilets were the occupations he sought out. In his eyes, none seemed beneath his dignity. He did not have only one Superior; all the Brothers became such for him, once he himself had given up that role. His will would not have had enough masters to suit it if he had to obey only one. To make sure that it was held captive under the yoke of unremitting obedience, he deferred to as many individual superiors as there were Brothers in charge of this or that service. Looking on all of them in the same way, he went to the kitchen or elsewhere not to offer his services to whoever was in charge but to seek orders and formally ask whether anyone had any commands to give him. The most docile child never showed more perfect obedience. The most attentive servant never displayed more marks of dependence. The most fervent novice never seemed more on guard against his own will or more prompt to sacrifice it than did the servant of God.

He had become through grace what children are because of their age. Simple, candid, unquestioning, unreasoning, he made use of his mind only to subject it to the opinions of others. Timid and hesitant, he did not presume to take a step except under the direction of Brother Henri L'Heureux. Like a child who examines his mother's countenance to discern what pleases or displeases her, he fastened his gaze on the face of his Superior to fathom his intentions and did not wait until the Superior had indicated his intent by a positive command. Having become a humble servant through virtue, he sought nothing except to learn and to accomplish the will of the master to whom he had subjected himself. The Superior's orders were the rule of his actions; his words became laws. To do this or that, to act or to remain at repose, to begin something and not to finish it—all was the same to him. Indifferent to everything, he was always ready to do what he was told.

Having become a novice through choice, De La Salle hastened along the path of perfection as though he were just beginning to walk therein. To make sure that he did not perform any actions that would not lead him to God, he based them all on the solid rock of obedience. For him, it was not enough to be the most punctual at the first sound of the bell, the most assiduous at all the regular observances, the most faithful in carrying out the common regulations. He wanted to be given special commands covering all he was to say or do. What a source of edification it was for the Brothers to see this holy priest,

this doctor, this former canon, their father, Founder, and Superior, their confessor and spiritual director, throwing himself at every moment and for the slightest motive at the feet of Brother Henri to confess his faults, accuse his least failings, and ask for a penance! What a surprise for those who witnessed all this to see a man of such surpassing merit constantly asking permissions for the least things and doing so on his knees in the attitude of a criminal and with the submission of a child!

Brother Henri L'Heureux, who witnessed actions of this sort all day long, could not get used to them. Embarrassed at seeing at his feet the man whom he honored as his father in God and revered as a saint, he felt like Saint John the Baptist when he was obliged to baptize Jesus Christ. Ashamed at having to give permissions to the one from whom he should have asked them, he remained abashed and did not know what he should say or do, so disconcerted was he. On the one hand, he feared to chagrin his good father by not letting him humble himself as he wished; on the other, he simply could not bring himself to give orders to the one who really had the right to command. More than once, he begged De La Salle to spare him the embarrassment he felt in seeing him so often at his feet asking for permissions from one who, on entering the house, had become his disciple and his dependent.

In his turn, De La Salle begged him not to deprive him of the merit of obedience which was due to him and which he was so happy to practice. The two of them became an example of humility and edification for the entire Community. The Brothers were deeply touched by seeing De La Salle so often prostrate before Brother Henri, accusing himself of his faults, asking for penances and permissions for the least things, and behaving in all respects as though he had never enjoyed any authority in the house, as though he had never left the state of dependence and inferiority. But they were also much edified when they saw Brother Henri humiliated over the humiliation of De La Salle, distraught at being his Superior, saddened over having to command him, and never forgetting who the humble suppliant really was or who he himself was.

The virtuous Brother made use of his authority only on one occasion, when De La Salle carried his love for abjection too far. He felt obliged to invoke his rights over him and to stop him from carrying out an extravagance to which his zeal for self-abasement was leading him. Here is what happened, as told by one of the earliest disciples of the pious Founder. "Among the many edifying things that De La Salle performed when he was out of office, I was the eyewitness of one

which impressed me deeply, although I was only fifteen years of age at the time. As we were beginning recreation one day, someone told the Superior that one of the toilets was very untidy and that he needed someone to help him clean it up. At once, De La Salle offered to go, and throwing himself on his knees, he asked permission to do so with the simplicity of a child. Carried away by his eagerness and without having heard correctly the respectful refusal of the Superior, he hastened to gather some straw in order to carry out a task which he longed to accomplish and in which he feared someone else might forestall him and thus rob him of the merit of abasing himself.

"In all this, the humble and obedient Founder had allowed himself to be deceived, had mistaken one word for another. Brother L'Heureux had told him *that would not be right*, but in his eagerness, he thought he heard him say *that would be all right*, and so he had hurried off in all good faith to perform an act of humility which he thought had been authorized by obedience. He had actually begun when Brother L'Heureux, hastening after him, remembered that he was the Superior and that as such he should make use of his authority to set some limits to the pious Founder's eagerness to humble himself. He caught hold of him by the soutane and pulled him away. Thus he gave him a chance to prefer obedience to humiliations, even external ones. Nor was this all. The young Superior, hoping to bridle to some extent this impetuous inclination which led De La Salle to undertake all forms of self-abasement, made bold to tell him that he had not permitted him to do anything of the sort and that he was acting against obedience. At those words, the humble priest fell on his knees in front of everybody, accused himself of temerity and willfulness, and besought Brother L'Heureux to give him a penance for it."

No matter how much the wise young Superior begged his venerated father to act toward him as a father toward his son—or at least as his equal—he never did succeed in convincing him. He never managed to persuade him to give up in the slightest degree his yearning for complete dependence. He exhibited this inclination not only inside the house and before the Brothers but outside, too, and in the presence of visitors, he made it a point of obligation. He did not blush to appear as an inferior and to ask for permissions as faithfully as any novice. He spoke to no one and received no visits without permission. Before going to the parlor, he always asked if Brother Superior's leave had been obtained, and if visitors happened to meet him when he had not been able to obtain this, he would not converse with them until an express permission, which he himself often went to ask for, unsealed his lips.

## The vicars-general restore De La Salle to the primary position

It was this scrupulous and exact fidelity to the rules and to obedience that betrayed De La Salle and made his humility known. The fact that he had been replaced as Superior had been kept a secret within the Community. Nobody on the outside knew about it, and the rare contacts between the public and the Brothers made it easy to keep it confidential. The mystery might have been preserved much longer if De La Salle had not given it away himself, thanks to his simplicity and eagerness to obey. One day, several distinguished persons, friends of his, came to visit and met him unexpectedly. They attempted to strike up a conversation, but he remained silent, except to say that he could not talk to them without permission from his Superior. These persons, greatly surprised at this, were dumbfounded in their turn and looked at each other in amazement. Meanwhile, De La Salle went to ask for the needed authorization. When he came back, his friends began by expressing their astonishment and then their reproaches; they roundly condemned such behavior and blamed a humility which in their opinion gravely infringed against prudence and contradicted his priestly character and all his other qualifications. A simple Brother placed over a priest, a doctor, a former canon? The Founder, father, director, and confessor of the little Community at the feet of one of his children, one of his penitents, seemed to them a disorder that called for a remedy, a monstrosity in the area of government.

These persons could not keep to themselves what had happened, and they broadcast the news throughout the city. The unusual nature of the fact made tongues wag; everyone had some comment to make. The news spread from mouth to mouth and finally came to the ears of the ecclesiastical authorities, who approved of it no more than did anyone else. They had the right and duty to re-establish order in the bosom of the little Community by putting the Founder back in his rightful position and the members in their due rank of subordination. So they came to the house and obliged De La Salle, to his great regret, to take up again his role as Superior, and they had Brother Henri L'Heureux resume his subordinate place, much to his satisfaction. This good Brother considered this the most fortunate day of his life, but it was a sad one for the humble Founder. The one was as happy as the other was displeased over what had transpired. De La Salle lived, as though in his nature, in an atmosphere of lowliness and obedience. His heart was at peace and enjoyed the repose promised to the humble and to those who practice perfect obedience. Never had he been happier; never had time gone by so swiftly. Brother

Henri, however, on leaving the role of Superior, left behind him an unnatural condition where his father's humility had kept him in constant embarrassment. He felt abashed and confused on seeing him prostrate at his feet, and he longed for nothing more than to return to his rightful state of dependence.

The humble Superior was thus obliged to reassume the leadership of his Community, a position that in his heart of hearts he had never wanted and had given up with so much joy. But although he reassumed his rightful position, he did not for all that renounce the right to obey and to humble himself. He merely found another way to do it. At any rate, this example of the noble longing to abase himself and to renounce his own will was an extremely valuable lesson for the young Community and proved very helpful to the Brothers. They all felt filled with a like ardor and ran in the path blazed for them by their mentor toward the goal of true humility and perfect obedience.

How great was the joy of the children on seeing their father, despite his humility, once again occupying the first place! How they longed to obey him blindly, since by his example even more eloquently than by his words, he had taught them the value of obedience! With what zeal they cast themselves at his feet to beg of him in suppliant posture not to spare them and to inflict on them severe penances to expiate faults which they had learned from his own lips how to exaggerate, to confess, and to chastise unrelentingly! Brother Henri L'Heureux, in particular, could not sufficiently thank God for having dealt appropriately with De La Salle and with himself: with himself by relieving him from office and putting him back in the ranks, with De La Salle by lifting him out of the lowly condition he had wanted to assume and by obliging him to take the headship again. Everybody rejoiced in the Lord and blessed him for what he had done. They were so impressed by the examples of virtue that they had seen in their father that they could speak of nothing else. They brought these edifying topics of conversation with them everywhere they went during recreation. This was what they usually talked about; it formed the common topic of their reflections.

De La Salle suspected what was going on; he was on the lookout to get proof of it. His suspicions made him ingenious, and he found means, without being perceived, of hearing what the Brothers were saying. He had not been eavesdropping very long when he heard them talking about him. If they had been relating the unfavorable things that he thought of himself, he would have been delighted that his disciples were treating him as he thought he deserved, but they were recounting only edifying details; they praised him, and each one

added something to top what the other said. The instances of humility, obedience, and mortification they had witnessed kept coming to the fore, and each speaker drew from them conclusions from which all could profit. De La Salle suffered keenly from this sort of talk, which embarrassed him very much, for he saw that his efforts to induce the Brothers to entertain a low opinion of him had been in vain. He was most disappointed at having failed so signally, and it is hard to say how much these flattering conversations alarmed and dismayed his humility. Upset over this—as a saint would be—he found it difficult to control his humility-inspired displeasure and reproached those who thus praised him, and after exaggerating the seriousness of this so-called fault, he promised to forgive them only on condition that from then on, they would forget entirely about this episode.

## He makes it a rule not to speak of any living person

Nor was this all; he wished, so to speak, to push vengeance to the extreme and sought for some means of causing his disciples to entertain scruples if they were ever tempted to speak well of him again. He felt he could not rely on them in this matter. He knew that although he tried to make their fault appear very serious, they were not too remorseful over it and would most likely fall into it again. To make sure they overcame this defect, edifying as it was and a fault which only his humility could perceive, he resolved to make it a rule for them *never to speak during recreation of any living person in particular.* We can easily imagine how disappointed his children were when they heard this prohibition. This rule seemed to be a very severe penance; in their eyes, if they had sinned, the punishment was far more grievous than the fault deserved. They had to accept it, however, and submit to it. In the long run, however, irked by having to shroud everything concerning him in silence—which in reality made it more difficult for them to progress in virtue, since nothing stimulates fervor more than eyewitness accounts of examples of heroic virtue—they begged their Superior to lighten this burden which they found intolerable. In the end, he was obliged to modify this rule, so pleasing to his humility but so galling to his disciples, and he added to the rule these words: *except to speak well of them.*

This instance of humility, I dare say, is one that will not be paralleled in the life of any other saintly person. It takes a very humble soul indeed not to be touched by praise; it takes an even humbler one to be unable to abide praise and instead to reject it with distaste, but does it not take a supremely humble person to grow angry at his

panegyrists, to treat their encomiums as crimes, to punish them for this, and to reduce them to silence as though they were enemies?

## Examples of mortification and penance

Some time after the humble Superior had once again taken up his duties, he ordered a Brother, as a penance, to eat his supper kneeling in the middle of the refectory. As the delinquent seemed reluctant to obey, De La Salle became indignant with the indignation of the saints. To repair the scandal given, he determined that he would act as though he were the guilty party and perform the penance he had assigned. So he rose from his place, went and knelt next to the Brother, took his spoon and began to eat the soup as he had prescribed that the other should do. The Brother, confused and contrite, wanted to take back the spoon from De La Salle's hand. The latter refused to let him have it. Hoping to inspire him with disgust and to get his Superior to leave him alone to finish his penance, the Brother put his hand into the bowl and began to scoop up the soup in that manner. He thought that De La Salle would not eat anymore after this, but he was mistaken. His Superior, who in the past had forced himself to perform such unusual actions to overcome his natural fastidiousness, had so perfectly succeeded in this that it no longer seemed to bother him at all.

Quite simply and without showing any sign of repugnance, he kept on eating the soup, although the Brother's gross action should have made it disgusting for him. The clumsy Brother joined imprudence to his lack of manners. Ashamed at seeing his Superior gaining merit, thanks to the new occasion he had furnished him of mortifying himself, he decided to prevent him from continuing by taking the bowl away, but the awkward movement he made only spilled the soup all over the floor. The opportunity was too precious to be wasted, thought De La Salle; he resolved to carry mortification as far as possible, so he sopped up as much of it as he could and ate it with apparent pleasure. The Brother wanted to imitate him, and so the two of them managed to clean up what had been spilled and ate it with relish. It was thus that the fervent Superior undertook to make up for the faults of his disciples. The slightest delay in obeying was considered a transgression which could not remain unpunished. To expiate such offenses, he condemned himself to bear the penalty and thus taught all those under him that true obedience is prompt and does not admit of any delay.

De La Salle's fervor constantly increased. Re-established in his position of authority, the only satisfaction he derived from it was that he

now could freely do as much penance as he liked and be accountable to no one on this score. The Brother who slept in the same room with him saw that he spent part of the night in interior prayer and then stretched himself out on a door that lay in an alcove and served as his resting place. There he took his scant measure of repose, with no mattress, pillow, sheets, or blankets.

This same Brother, who later became the Director of the house, affirms that his Superior spent all of Holy Week fasting. From Palm Sunday to Easter, he abstained from all nourishment except for a piece of bread and a little water on Holy Thursday after the ceremonies. He was not in the habit of drinking wine, and it was rarely served in the house at Reims, the city in all of France where wine is most abundant and of the best quality. He spent this entire Holy Week in prayer and contemplation in his room, which he left only to celebrate Mass. This cell was so bare and scantily furnished that he did not even have a chair to sit on. When he could no longer remain on his knees, he was obliged to sit on the side of a sorry-looking bare bed, the only piece of furniture in the room. The Brother observing his Superior's excessive abstinence from food did all he could to induce him to mitigate it but without success. Perhaps De La Salle himself regretted this on Easter Sunday, for when he arrived with the others for dinner in the refectory, his stomach could not tolerate any food and rejected whatever he tried to swallow. Thus the obstinate faster had to do penance for having fasted so rigorously. The Brother did not miss the opportunity of observing that this new indisposition was the consequence of his long fast and of respectfully reproaching him with having carried it too far.

De La Salle was not convinced; he claimed that his upset stomach was caused by the fact that the cook had made the soup in a pot not properly tinned. If such had been the case, all of the Brothers who ate the same food would have been similarly affected, but none of them experienced any difficulty. This is what the Brother took the liberty of telling his Superior, but the latter replied only with his usual smile. Whenever anyone alluded to his mortifications or his other virtues, he would smile and change the subject.

# CHAPTER VI

*De La Salle does not give up his plan to return to the lowest place and to walk again in the way of pure obedience; his virtue becomes known and earns for him a great reputation; several persons beg him to act as their spiritual director; he accepts only a few, and soon manages to send them elsewhere; he undergoes new persecutions; Divine Providence furnishes him with the opportunity of establishing a second community for country schoolmasters and a third for young postulants.*

Although De La Salle had been obliged by the vicars-general to resume his position at the head of the Brothers' Community, he occupied it with regret and continued to feel an irresistible attraction for the last place which constantly drew him to return to it, but this had been definitely vetoed by the ecclesiastical authorities. They were almost scandalized on seeing him subject to a Brother lacking in clerical status, and while they privately admired his humility, they reproached him with having carried its practice too far, and in public they appeared to condemn the lengths to which this rarest of virtues had led him.

De La Salle began to realize that their main objection was not insurmountable. With a little ingenuity, he thought he could find a way once more to resign his position as Superior without meriting the just reproach they had made for subjecting his person and his priestly character to a layman. Humility can be resourceful, and it is difficult to block up all the byways that lead to abjection and scorn. Fertile in expedients to open for itself the door to dependence and obedience, when one avenue is shut, humility finds another.

What then did De La Salle do to find a refuge where he might disappear from the sight of men after abandoning his role as Superior and where he might live in a state of eternal dependence? He could neither degrade himself nor efface the sacerdotal character he bore, but he could raise one of the Brothers to this sublime dignity, set him at his right hand, and finally place him over himself. Nobody would have any objection.

It was certainly an ingenious expedient. It answered all the objections previously made. Once one priest was ready to replace another priest in the government of the Brothers, his status as a priest

would enable him to succeed to all of the prerogatives of De La Salle, whose sacerdotal character would no longer be degraded if he were to sit at the feet of a fellow priest. Ordination, by conferring on this man the same powers that he himself possessed, would make him capable of exercising all of his predecessor's functions. De La Salle could find no more appropriate means, therefore, of making way for someone else and of doing so with full regard for the proprieties, while avoiding all the reproaches previously levelled at him, than by preparing for ordination the Brother who had been chosen as his successor. Such was the determination he reached, but this solution, so carefully thought out, involved certain difficulties.

Brother Henri L'Heureux possessed solid virtue, eminent piety, and great prudence. He was altogether a deserving person, but he had not gone very far in his studies and knew Latin only imperfectly. Since he had to learn it, De La Salle undertook to teach it to him and succeeded admirably. This Brother had a quick mind and much capacity for learning, so that less than two years later, he was ready to undertake the study of theology. He did, in fact, study it with such success that he surprised the other members of his class. Up to this point, the scheme of the humble Superior was proceeding just as he wished, but God had other plans and brought the project of his servant to nothing, just when he thought it was about to succeed. God called Brother L'Heureux from this world when De La Salle was on the point of presenting him for ordination, as we shall relate in a moment.

## The death of Brother L'Heureux changes the Founder's plans

This unexpected death occasioned serious disruption in the servant of God's plans and led him to rethink the whole matter very seriously. In his original concept for the organization of his Institute, he had thought of having a priest in each of the principal houses to act as the confessor of the Brothers and to say Mass for them. Brother Henri L'Heureux would have been the first entrusted with the ministry of priestly functions within the congregation, and the holy Superior, who in his heart of hearts had already chosen him as his own successor, was only waiting for the proper time to put him in office.

Everything seemed to favor this hope. The Brother had all the qualities of body and mind he needed. Young, hardworking, gifted with a robust constitution—one might have thought that he would live forever, if man were not a mortal being. Prudent, wise, endowed with good judgment and sufficient learning, filled with zeal and the

spirit of his state, he was entirely capable of causing the holy Founder, who loved him so much, to live again in his person. De La Salle loved and honored him and entertained the fondest hopes for him. Could he be insensible at the loss of such an excellent subject? Hardly, especially as he had not had time to prepare himself for this blow. Hence he felt it all the more keenly.

Never had the Brothers known him to be so deeply moved, so distraught, so shocked as he was on this occasion. Up to then, they had never seen him lose his equanimity. Ever the master of himself, he ruled his soul in patience. The saddest events seemed unable to penetrate the depths of his soul and were never reflected on his countenance by the slightest trace of disquiet or chagrin. But on this occasion, his emotions and his grief clearly appeared—but only for a quarter of an hour, at most. After this brief space of time, the Founder recovered his usual attitude of peace and serenity, thanks to his entire submission to God's will and to a total abandonment of his desires to those of Providence.

Furthermore, considering that the action of Providence on this occasion constituted a sign warning him not to think any longer of raising some of the Brothers to the priesthood, the Founder gave up the idea entirely. This decision, which was inspired from on high, became such a solidly anchored conviction in his mind that he made it a law for his followers, an express rule, that the path to the sanctuary would remain forever barred to them, and he definitively forbade them to aspire to Holy Orders.

As careful as De La Salle was to concentrate on his own work and not to deal with outsiders any more than he had to, he had not been able to refuse his ministrations to a number of persons who had recourse to him. Thus he added to the direction of the community of orphan girls the spiritual guidance of a number of women distinguished by their piety. From time to time, they came to visit him at the Brothers' house and gave him an account of their consciences. They were very glad to receive his wise advice, but they went back home disappointed at not having been able to obtain his blessing, even though they had humbly begged for it, throwing themselves on their knees on the threshold of his door and entreating him to grant them this favor so much in keeping with his priestly character. They never succeeded in convincing him to do so. All his life, his disciples themselves found him stubbornly unwilling to grant them this favor which he considered to be a sign of superiority. One of them, whom he was sending to Rome, threw himself at his feet as he was leaving and asked for his blessing. He begged him insistently to afford him

this final consolation, but De La Salle merely made the sign of the cross on his forehead. As long as he lived, he never wanted to do more than this. As for the ladies, he told them that he gave his blessing only from the altar.

As time went on, the fierce persecutions that hell aroused against the servant of God did not lead to a notable increase among his penitents and other devout clients. Few people were eager to put themselves under the direction of a man so ill spoken of in the world. As we know, the cycle of fashion applies to spiritual directors as to everything else. As long as a director is in vogue, he enjoys a following, but when his reputation suffers an eclipse, his followers melt away, and he loses his credit. In the long run, however, real holiness is made manifest; it shines out with new brilliance like light that dissipates the fog that shrouded it. This is what happened to the servant of God.

## Reims finally gives De La Salle's virtue its just due

His virtue, which had met with so many critics, finally found admirers and panegyrists. Awareness of his extraordinary acts of humility finally spread, obliging his enemies and those who had accused him of ambition to admit that the only thing he sought was a state of dependence and contempt. From then on, people began to realize what an exalted level of holiness he had reached. Men of the highest distinction, among others, the Duke de Mazarin, sedulously cultivated his friendship. Every time he came to Reims, this noble lord never failed to come to visit him. A large number of people wanted him as their spiritual director. Pious persons once again began to call on him in the hope of being admitted among his penitents. This he tried to avoid as much as possible, and only after much urging did he finally accept a small number of persons to direct.

He admitted them only after subjecting them to various trials which put their self-love to the test. Among those who had seemed most eager to become one of his spiritual daughters was a certain religious who must have been inspired by God in this, since she was sadly in need of reforming her life. This Sister had a certain amount of goodwill, but she was attached to many trifles which keep the heart of a spouse of Christ closed to his divine love and cause the loss of many graces. Involved in a multitude of vain amusements and attached to little nothings which prevented her from progressing in the path of perfection that she had undertaken to pursue, she realized that she was too weak to break the chains that bound her and did not

have the courage to divest herself of these superfluities. The hand of De La Salle was what she needed to deliver her from herself and from all the silly baubles which held her heart captive. In his charity, he undertook to help her. The first thing he did was to ask her what Jesus had asked the leper: *Do you wish to be cured?* Do you really want me to be your director? Do you choose me for your guide and your visible guardian angel? Will you, through the eyes of faith, look upon me as Jesus Christ himself? Are you ready to obey me as you would him?

The nun naturally protested that she would indeed do so. Then he told her that the first act of obedience he required of her, the condition on which he agreed to guide her, was for her to bring him all the useless little objects she had accumulated in her room. It was a painful demand. This religious had quantities of knickknacks and various curious and dainty things which she loved, and the sacrifice must have been a bitter one. Nevertheless, she obeyed, and after removing from her cell all that was superfluous, she set fire to the lot by the orders and under the eyes of her new director.

It was under such conditions that the servant of God agreed to become a director of souls. He made them purchase this favor by stern sacrifices that were keenly felt. He did not try to amuse people by lengthy discourses but made them get down right away to practical consequences. He made them learn by experience that true devotion only needs direction to find its way to Jesus Christ more surely and promptly by means of obedience and sacrifice.

Although he undertook the direction of just a small number of choice souls, among whom was his own sister, De La Salle still thought he had too many. He therefore sought to rid himself of this burden and soon succeeded in doing so. As we know, the spiritual direction of pious women takes a great deal of time, and no matter what precautions a priest may employ to avoid wasting time, they still manage to consume a lot of it. Women are marvelously adept at saying little in many words, and when we are willing to listen to them, they always find a great deal to say. As a rule, they are not happy with a director unless he lets them talk their fill and unless he does the same. Few of them are looking for good advice in a few words. It rarely happens that a man who is sparing of his time and very busy is much sought after by pious women, who, having much free time, are very clever at keeping their confessor occupied for long periods and are more curious to learn new things about virtue than eager to practice what they already know.

De La Salle's days were too short as it was, and he had to economize his time in order to devote all his spare moments to interior

prayer and to the duties of his position. Consequently, he was not too pleased by visits which, under the pretext of spiritual direction, robbed him of part of his precious leisure. Convinced that as a rule, there was little to be gained and much time to be lost in directing pious women and having learned from experience that he spent more time counseling one of them than several Brothers, he concluded that he should leave this ministry to people who feel some inclination to it, who have more time to devote to it, and who have nothing better to do.

Another drawback to being a spiritual guide for women and one that turned De La Salle away from it was that they came to the Brothers' house. While they did not go any farther than the parlor, they still appeared in a place where he preferred not to see them. He wished to teach his disciples to keep their distance from women and felt that this could not be carried too far. He was afraid to familiarize them with women by letting them come to the house. It is true that the ones who came were most edifying and showed by their solid virtue how effective the servant of God's direction was. But he knew that the fair sex is dangerous, both by its vices and by its virtues, that even modesty and piety can be a snare for devout eyes, and that for sincerely virtuous men, a saintly woman is almost as much to be avoided as an immoral one, since she inspires more esteem and thus gives rise to a sense of security which exposes one to be taken by surprise and tempted.

The best means that the wise Superior found to preserve his disciples from this danger was to make it impossible for them to encounter or even to see these persons. By declining to accept the charitable ministry which led them to seek his house, he did not cause them any major inconvenience. If those who lost him as their director could not have found a better one among a thousand, at least they did have the consolation of finding many others always eager to receive them and to take up where De La Salle had left off. He did not, however, brusquely dismiss these followers. If all the sheep had begun to complain of their shepherd at once, they would have created too great an outcry and might have moved him to compassion. But he let them go one at a time, at appropriate moments, and on different occasions. Thus their complaints were too muted to be widely heard.

Moreover, new persecutions—which it seems should be dated back to this period—hastened the dropping of some and the desertion of others. Such is the world, which never leaves the saints in peace for long. Irreconcilable enemy of virtue that it is, it always finds some new quarrel to pick with those who practice perfection, and if

sometimes it appears to have signed a peace treaty with them, it soon violates the pact and recommences hostilities.

## New persecution because of disciplinary practices in the schools

What lay behind the new campaign against the holy Founder and his disciples seems to have been the disciplining of some of the students. There is perhaps no place on earth where youngsters were meaner, more stubborn, and more good-for-nothing than Reims at this particular time. They were born with no redeeming traits and were sheltered by the ill temper of their parents. Raised in the paternal home, they saw nothing but bad example, heard only language capable of instilling poison into their hearts, and were abandoned to ignorance and the vicious inclinations of their nature. They had recourse to the protection of their parents' anger against the deserved corrections inflicted on them by the Brothers, and they were clever enough to profit by this.

These little idols, adored by their fathers and mothers, were sure that at their first cry they would find refuge in the hearts of their parents. They thought that they should be honored at school as at home and that people should be pleased with watching them talk, laugh, fool around, make monkeyshines, and play tricks in church before the altar. Even during the celebration of the holy sacrifice of the Mass, they acted as if they had the right to flaunt their lack of piety. All the decent citizens of Reims bewailed this situation but did not dare to complain in front of the parents, for fear of arousing this uncouth rabble which returns a torrent of abuse for the least word of reproach.

The evil was serious and was getting worse. It even seemed impossible to remedy it, since those who should have corrected it were the very ones who permitted it through a blind love for their children. Since they did nothing, it was up to the Brothers to try. Responsible for educating these hardheaded young rascals, the Brothers had to attempt by punishment to curb their evil conduct and their lack of piety. This was what was expected of their zeal, and right-thinking people made them understand that it was their duty. But when they tried to fulfill it, how the little scamps howled! How they aroused the anger of their parents! The devil got into the act, since it was he who had the most to lose through the success of the Gratuitous Schools.

Above all else, this enemy of all that is good hated these new establishments, for he could already foresee all the good they would produce, and he feared their progress. The Christian education that the children received in the new schools struck at the roots of the evil

and corrected the defects stemming from poor upbringing. It made them realize that their souls were immortal, that life is short, that the moment of death is uncertain. The fear of God entered these young hearts by slow degrees and bridled their passions which, even though hardly awakened, were already straining at the leash. By learning how to serve God, to render to him morning and evening the duties that religion inspires, to attend services in church respectfully, to hear Mass with piety, and to prepare for the sacraments, they seemed to be full-fledged Christians when they were barely beyond their childhood years, and they gave their parents and teachers reason to hope that the seeds sown in their hearts through the instructions they had received would spring up in due time and produce much fruit. These excellent results were already appearing, and that was why the devil was so eager to sow cockle amidst the wheat and to choke the good grain under an invasion of weeds.

Satan believed that the incorrigible students would be of help to him in his scheme. These boys, refractory to any sort of discipline, revolted against flogging and other forms of chastisement. It was impossible to apply any type of punishment to them without causing a huge uproar. At first, the Brothers made use of all the means of correction which usually prove effective on characters that are not totally depraved. Charitable warnings, kindness mingled with severity, had been resorted to in vain. Then came threats, but the boys only laughed at these. Mild measures having had no great effect, in order to prevent an outbreak of disorder in the schools and chaos among the students, it became necessary to turn to more vigorous means, to appeal to authority and to menaces, and, finally, to make use of corporal punishment, following the advice of the Wise Man, who warns those in charge of educating children that they must not hesitate to correct them, for if they are chastised with rods, they will not die from it; on the contrary, their souls can be delivered from hell by this means.

Physical correction, which followed the threats that had been so often made in vain, proved effective with those whose character was not completely untamable. But these boys had always done just as they pleased; from the cradle onward, they had been their own masters and lived as their desires suggested under the eyes of parents too uncaring and indifferent to try to restrain them. Instead of profiting by this correction, they became embittered, and all of them together stirred up in their families a movement of revolt which eventually turned into a public and general condemnation of the Brothers.

To bring this about, these young rebels exaggerated the punishments inflicted on them at school. But this was enough for parents

who were beyond appeals to either faith or reason. Their fury knew no bounds. Instead of approving and backing up by their own authority the wise corrections given in the schools, instead of obliging these graceless scamps to beg pardon of their teachers and to make amends for the scandal they had given, they encouraged the mutiny. They decried the Brothers as sadists and hurled all sorts of vile imprecations at them. They took up stones to throw at them and pursued them through the streets. They incited children to run behind the Brothers and spatter them with mud, to gather together and hoot at them, and thus take vengeance by all sorts of outrages for the wise correction given them.

The Brothers were already used to such scenes of public abuse and merely gave new proofs of their humility, mildness, and patience, following the example of their Divine Master. They did not open their lips, save to bless those who screamed out insults against them and assailed them with curses. No threatening or impatient words escaped them addressed to those who maltreated them, and they willingly did penance for these wicked children who needed it so badly.

De La Salle, of course, received the lion's share of this ill-treatment. As the originator of these Gratuitous Schools, he was blamed for everything that had happened in them. He should have kept better watch over them and thus forestalled the imprudent acts which gave rise to these complaints. It was up to him to mitigate the penances imposed and to teach the Brothers the secret of keeping to the golden mean which makes correction effective. In a word, De La Salle was the one really to blame, and he alone should bear the consequences of the disorder that was taking place. What did he think of all this himself? He thought what the others thought. Condemned by the public, he condemned himself to drink the chalice of confusion presented to him wherever he appeared, even in his house in the person of his disciples. God allowed this harassment because it merited the great blessings which the Christian Schools were to bring about in Reims. As long as De La Salle remained in Reims, he had to contend with opposition and was exposed to ill-treatment day after day, until 1688, when he went to Paris to try to open a school there.

Once he left for Paris, things changed completely in Reims. The city calmed down and modified its attitude toward the Brothers. It would seem that at this point all the devils who had fomented the difficulties and troubles left Reims with him and followed him to Paris, to carry on there what they had begun in the capital of Champagne. De La Salle, if I may use the language of the Apostle, had received the privilege not only of believing in Jesus Christ and of making him

known but also of suffering for him everywhere. It was his role to prepare the way for the success of the Christian Schools by practicing limitless patience and perfect humility. The schools in Reims, the first objects of his charity and the first theater of his crosses and humiliations, were also the first to be abundantly blessed by heaven, for after his departure, the seed he had sown with so many tears sprang up into a rich harvest, and the Brothers whom he left behind him were able to reap a hundredfold. The boys of the city, brought up by such good masters, seemed transformed. They came to school regularly, were attentive to the instructions of the Brothers, and were docile to their reprimands. They showed themselves open to piety and inclined to virtue. This transformation was slow in coming, of course, but it was profound and lasting. It still endures, and there is every reason to hope it will be permanent.

## He undertakes a long trip to visit a sick Brother

During this period of continual opposition, which at almost every moment provided the servant of God with opportunities for practicing patience, humility, and mortification, Divine Providence afforded him an occasion for displaying these virtues through a remarkable act of charity. In 1687, the first of the Brothers who taught in the school at Guise fell desperately ill and received the last sacraments. The physicians despaired of the Brother's life and gave him up for lost. The Brother was waiting only for the moment to give his soul back to its Maker in peace. Before embarking on this journey to eternity, the dying man expressed a vehement desire to see his good father. This longing experienced by the sick Brother was a pious and legitimate one, but it was not easy to satisfy, as Guise lies eighteen leagues from Reims, and such a trip required time.

To try to satisfy the patient's wishes, it was decided to send someone to Laon, which is about halfway between Guise and Reims, with a letter addressed to the Brothers telling them about the situation and asking them to send someone to the Superior to let him know of the sick Brother's desire. The first messenger reached Laon about four in the afternoon. Brother N., who is still living and who composed one of the memoranda used in writing this history, immediately left Laon for Reims, reaching there the next day around noon. With equal concern, De La Salle set out in the company of the same Brother at one o'clock.

In spite of the extreme midsummer heat, De La Salle wore his heavy capote, which he used all the time he remained in Reims and

only gave up in Paris on the orders of his ecclesiastical superiors. He also had on a soutane made of the same heavy, coarse material, which he never took off and which he merely lifted up halfway to his knees with his shabby woolen cincture when he went on foot. He also wore a hairshirt, as he usually did, which pained him so much that he could hardly bend over, as someone observed, when he dropped his handkerchief and had to stoop to pick it up. In spite of all this penitential accoutrement, he covered seven leagues under a broiling sun. He might have rid himself of the heavy burden of his capote, at least, by letting his young companion carry it, but he was not the kind of man who sought to make things easier for himself, still less to do so at the expense of someone else.

During this painful journey, his blood pressure rose so much that he bled profusely from the nose, but the only relief he sought was in prayer. During the whole trip, he did nothing but sigh and raise his eyes to heaven. That was where his heart's desires lay and where he promised his overburdened body to let it rest from its sufferings and fatigue. When oncoming night made it necessary for them to halt at a village, he said the rosary aloud with the young Brother who accompanied him. After taking some rest in a very rustic inn, he left at three the next morning.

He did not reach Laon quickly, even though it was only three leagues farther down the road; he took a long time to recite his breviary and to practice other devotions as they walked. From time to time, he would stop and kneel before a tree to pour out his soul before God and enter into a deeper union with him. Perhaps, too, the fatigue and exhaustion he felt after the efforts of the previous day made it impossible for him to go on. The first thing he did on arriving was to hasten to celebrate Mass. The Brothers at Laon, unknown to him, got a horse ready for him while he was celebrating. On horseback, he did not take too long to reach Guise. The sick Brother was dying, but on seeing his good father, who embraced him tenderly, he seemed to revive. He even exclaimed that he was cured, and in fact, a few days later, he was out of danger, completely recovered and ready to go back to his class.

At this time, De La Salle was about thirty-six years old. He seemed to think that his youth and vigor gave him the right to load his body with all the austerities it could possibly bear, so his fervor knew no limits. The amazing thing is that he did not succumb or shorten his life by the practice of penance beyond all measure.

## Country pastors ask for Brothers; reasons for the refusal

It was about this time also that Divine Providence opened up for De La Salle a vast field for the exercise of his zeal without leading him away from the purpose of his Institute. The Founder's reputation for holiness and that of his disciples extended far and wide. The good accomplished in the Christian Schools became known in towns and villages throughout the area around Reims and aroused the zeal of the parish priests. Many of them eagerly sought to have some Brothers to take charge of the Christian education and instruction of young boys, so often left to themselves, a prey to ignorance.

These zealous pastors were looking for a remedy to an evil which the servant of God, too, had been concerned about for a long time. He desired even more than they did to cure a malady which was becoming fatal for the majority of the rural poor, but the more he thought over the problem, the less could he discern a means of solving it. No doubt the Founder's disciples could do as much good in the villages as they did in the towns and cities. They might even have found it easier, since they would have met with more docility among the children and less opposition from their parents. But where could one find in a small village the resources needed to defray the living expenses of two Brothers? The most sincerely disposed parish priest, even with the help of his parishioners, would not as a rule have been able to provide such funds.

Moreover, if a second Brother might have been necessary in the larger parishes, he would have been superfluous in the smaller ones. Consequently, if De La Salle had agreed to furnish teachers for the villages, he would have had to consent to send only one Brother, a thing that the pious Founder could not bring himself to do. He saw too many drawbacks in such a measure. It seemed clear to him that the danger of perversion or at least of relaxation would inevitably threaten these isolated Brothers, left to themselves with no companions, no good example, and practically no moral support in these little villages. This was why De La Salle made it a rule never to send a Brother alone to any school. Never did he consent to break this resolution. In spite of his great desire to cooperate with these country parish priests, he could not, however, accede to their requests. To all he replied that he had made it an inviolable rule never to assign a Brother alone to any such mission.

Zeal is ingenious and always tries to find a way. Difficulties only make it more resourceful, and by trying various expedients, it finally hits on one that succeeds. When these virtuous parish priests realized

that they could not obtain any of De La Salle's disciples, they did not give up hope of getting some of his students, at least, or teachers trained by him. To succeed in this, all they needed to do was to choose among the young men in their villages those who seemed the most well behaved, the most pious, and the most gifted for studies and send them to the new academy of the Brothers, where they would be taught and trained. This the pastors did. Each priest selected from among the young men in his flock the one whom grace seemed to have pointed out by endowing him with the qualities needed to become a leader for the rest. They sent these young men to the holy Founder to be brought up under his guidance. Soon the house was filled with them, for the zealous Superior, delighted at the thought that these candidates could do the work of the Brothers in their respective villages and bring with them not only instruction but the seeds of virtue and piety as well, received them all with open arms and established for them a sort of seminary, separate from the Brothers' community.

## De La Salle opens a center to train country schoolteachers

There were about thirty young men in this new community. They had their own special schedule and their own particular exercises. They were taught reading, writing, Gregorian chant, and everything else pertinent to the profession they wished to exercise. Definite times were assigned to interior prayer, vocal prayer, spiritual reading, and all the other practices of Christian piety. A carefully selected Brother had charge of this new section and directed it under the eyes and following the advice of De La Salle. This extra work also entailed added expense which had to be met by the servant of God. For when the parish priests sent him these young aspiring teachers to train, they did not undertake to pay him anything for his efforts. They expected him to do everything out of pure charity and to provide for the material wants of those who were sent to him for spiritual formation. Their expectations were not disappointed. He who feeds the birds of the air and nourishes with so much goodness the ravens and their brood which cry out to him extended his providential care over a man who had abandoned himself entirely to him and did not permit those whom he had directed to him to lack anything.

De La Salle did not labor in vain in cultivating this new field that God had given him. When sowing the seeds of piety in these hearts, he did not sow in infertile ground. His pains and his charity were rewarded when he beheld the Lord's blessings follow these young

teachers on their return to their villages. There they did an immense amount of good and spread the bountiful radiance of Jesus Christ by their example, piety, zeal, and determination to fulfill in most exemplary fashion the duties of their profession. At the same time, they spread the reputation of the new Institute, and by the witness of their upright lives, they indicated what sort of house it was where a group of young peasants had so quickly learned new ways and taken on a new spirit, emerging therefrom as fervent Christians all on fire to go home and teach Christian doctrine to children.

Differing from the Brothers exteriorly—especially in their dress, since all of them wore secular clothes and were not distinguished from other laymen except by their special collar and their shorter hair—they resembled them interiorly by their modesty and recollection. Several of them indeed did not wish to leave a house where they had found the Spirit of God and enjoyed the happiness of serving him. They begged the pious Founder to admit them into the Brothers' Community, and this he granted them. In this way, De La Salle gathered the first fruits of the seeds he had sown. The other trainees, who went back to those who had sent them, never forgot either the house where they had for the first time received the spirit of grace or him who had welcomed them with so much kindness. They considered De La Salle a father and always preserved filial sentiments toward him.

This creation, as necessary as it was desirable, did not continue as prosperously as its beginning might have augured. Once he who was its support was no longer present, it soon fell into ruin. De La Salle had hardly left Reims for Paris when this seminary folded up. The servant of God, who understood its usefulness better than anyone else, several times attempted to re-establish it. Toward 1700, it seemed that he was going to succeed in founding a similar one in the parish of Saint Hippolyte in Paris, but after an auspicious beginning, it, too, was ruined, thanks to the ambition and cupidity of the Brother placed in charge of it.

This initiative, which the servant of God was so anxious to launch, may yet see fulfillment. Full of their father's spirit, De La Salle's children inherited his zeal with regard to this good work, and they hope to revive it some day at their important establishment at Saint Yon, near Rouen.

## A center for young postulants wishing to become Brothers

A third community, different than the other two, was also created in De La Salle's house about this time. It was made up of a number of boys, fourteen or fifteen years old, whom the Spirit of God had inspired with the desire of joining the new Institute. The only obstacle preventing their acceptance was their youth. The wise Superior had, on the one hand, his doubts about them on this score and feared lest such youthful recruits might bring a childish, schoolboy spirit into his Community. On the other hand, these youngsters showed much goodwill and a firmness of resolution beyond their years. They were absolutely determined to be the children of the one whom they had chosen as their father. Without allowing his refusal to dampen their enthusiasm, they kept knocking at the door until it was finally opened to them. Their constancy impressed the man of God favorably and led him to hope that they would remain steadfast in a state of life which they had sought to embrace with such perseverance.

The Founder's wisdom suggested that he put them to a test. He made of them a special group and assigned to them religious exercises, proper to their age, which might nourish their vocation, prepare them for fulfilling the mission of the Brothers, and help them grow in piety and in virtue. Since their age did not allow them to bear the full burden of the common rule, he gave them an easier one, better adapted to their capacity, which helped them cultivate true devotion and the spirit of prayer without inducing distaste and boredom through too lengthy, too serious, and too demanding a program of spiritual exercises. These tender plants needed to be treated with care, discretion, and caution, so as to mature intellectually, cultivate judgment, and prepare to advance to the Community of Brothers.

It was with these conditions and precautions that the prudent Superior admitted these boys. He assigned them to a wing of the building separate from the quarters of the country schoolmasters and of the Brothers. The kitchen communicated with the three separate dining rooms. This young community depended for its subsistence on the same source as did the other two: Divine Providence and De La Salle's charity were their only resources. He had to find in the treasure house of his heavenly Father the means of supporting them, not that this caused him any concern. The One for whose love he had sacrificed everything was more than able to provide for all these needs and to furnish what was necessary for all those God sent to him.

De La Salle did not change anything in the dress of these young men. Each one wore what he had brought with him. The only thing

common to all of them which distinguished them from outsiders was the collar they wore and their short hair. Their lifestyle was quite different than that of the country schoolmasters and constituted a sort of introduction to and imitation of that of the Brothers. At the appointed hour, they learned reading, writing, and arithmetic. The rest of the time they spent in exercises of piety appropriate for their age. Every day they recited the Little Office of the Most Blessed Virgin and said the rosary. They made an examen twice a day and also devoted themselves to spiritual reading and interior prayer under the guidance of one of the most pious and capable Brothers. As a rule, they went to Communion every week. In short, their lives were organized more or less like those of the novices today. The wise Superior chose those who, at the age of sixteen or seventeen, seemed to have the best dispositions and brought them over to the Brothers' section, gave them the habit, and sent them to teach.

This sort of junior seminary for these lads, which took the place of a training center and novitiate for the Institute, was a place which the servant of God delighted in visiting. When time permitted, he enjoyed assisting at their exercises of piety and addressing exhortations to them. On Christmas Day, he joined them in consecrating himself to the Child Jesus and showed them how to do the same. The first time he did this, his devotion appeared so manifest and especially lively that all of these youths were deeply impressed. To insure that this pious ceremony would speak to their hearts and inspire their devotion, De La Salle caused a figure of the Divine Infant to be placed in their oratory. Each one knelt in turn to make his act of consecration before it. The pious Founder began, and prostrate at the feet of the sacred image, he read his consecration aloud with as much faith, reverence, and devotion as he would have shown if he had seen the Divine Infant with his own eyes.

Imitating him, everyone came in turn to recite the consecration with a fervor which was the counterpart of that of De La Salle. Nothing was more edifying than to see these boys, at an age when they are at their liveliest and most exuberant, betray their youth only by their fresh countenances without allowing it to appear at all in their behavior. So recollected and modest did they appear in their house that they might have been mistaken for religious, already mature in virtue, moving about within their cloister. Outside of the house, anyone who happened to meet them might have thought that they were hermits of old, who seemed to make no use of their senses when they left their caves. In fact, they had eyes without seeing and ears without hearing, and they behaved in the midst of the world like

strangers who pass through a place without caring to look at anyone. I myself saw this in Paris when they used to serve Mass at the church of Saint Sulpice.

This little community survived for about two years in Reims after De La Salle departed for Paris. Once established in the capital, he thought it best to bring them there to have them under his supervision, and he gave the Brothers' habit to a few of those who belonged to the group at that time. At the request of Monsieur Baudran, pastor of Saint Sulpice, several others were assigned to serve Mass at the parish church. They spent the entire morning in this holiest of functions. They arrived at the sacristy in the morning and left only at noon to return to the Brothers' house, where they slept and had their meals. In this situation where they were so much exposed to distractions, people could see them kneeling in profound silence and seemingly absorbed in prayer. One after the other they would go, clad in their violet cassocks, to serve the priests at the altar, and when they returned with them to the sacristy, they once more took their places kneeling and continued their prayer, which seemed to last all morning. Nothing was more edifying, and those who beheld them were filled with admiration.

It was in this occupation, however, that they found their downfall. These boys were withdrawn from their normal environment when they were taken out of the house, and although the service required of them was indeed a noble one, it was not part of their vocation. Thus it came about that in an environment which involved certain dangers and where not all of those whom they served at the altar were always models of piety, they gradually fell away from virtue.

De La Salle understood full well the perils which threatened these young men and the temptations to which they were exposed, but he was not in a position to decide. Those on whom he depended or on whom he chose to depend—whom he absolutely needed at this time—made it an obligation for him to let the program continue. This frustrating situation lasted for some time, but he was finally able to bring it to an end. After withdrawing from parish service the boys who served Mass, he sent home those whose fervor had faded away or who were not considered apt for his Institute, and he admitted to the Institute the others who had preserved the spirit and grace of their calling.

Thus, before leaving for Paris, whither we shall soon follow him, De La Salle found himself during the last years he remained in Reims at the head of three different communities, all of which tended to the same end but by different means.

# CHAPTER VII

*De La Salle learns of the death of Nyel and has prayers offered for him; he leaves Reims for Paris; the cross follows him there and becomes the foundation for his new establishment.*

Nyel, who had played a part in the founding of the new Institute in Reims, whither Madame Maillefer had sent him, had gone back to Rouen, as we mentioned, after abandoning all the establishments he had created. By this desertion, he had obliged De La Salle to take charge of them all. Nyel rejoiced at having been the first worker whom Divine Providence had used to lay the foundations of the edifice of the Christian Schools which De La Salle had proceeded to build up so courageously, and he could say with the saintly old man Simeon, *Lord, let your servant depart in peace*. There is no more for me to do in this land of exile, since my eyes have seen the one whom you have chosen to accomplish your designs for the foundation of the Gratuitous Schools, which were always the objects of my zeal. Now I seek nothing other than to close my eyes in death. Nyel did, in fact, pass away where he had wanted to retire, in Rouen on 31 May 1687.

De La Salle seemed deeply touched on learning the news, and on various occasions he expressed his sense of loss over this demise. Without delay, he asked for prayers, both public and private, for the eternal repose of the deceased. In addition, to honor his memory, he had the chapel of the Sisters of the Child Jesus draped in black, and he himself sang a solemn Requiem Mass, attended by all his disciples, together with their students, brought thither with much order and modesty.

In this way, Divine Providence took care to honor the memory of a virtuous layman, fired with zeal for imparting Christian doctrine, who had spent his life and taken infinite pains to teach it with perfect disinterestedness for the benefit of the poorest and most neglected children. It seems that God in his goodness, by choosing Nyel to be the first promoter of the Brothers' Institute, wanted to have his name gratefully remembered and to make clear how agreeable the labor of this good Christian man was to him and how useful to the Church. Nyel is rightly mentioned in this history. We have seen how he brought about the founding of the Institute. For this reason, the Brothers are under obligation to him and should revere his name and his memory.

De La Salle certainly did so. He owed Nyel this in justice, for I dare say that nobody in the world ever rendered him a more valuable service. Was he not the man whom God made use of to open to De La Salle the path leading to the highest sanctity? If this simple layman had not begun founding Christian and Gratuitous Schools, if he had not set the pious canon on the road to being concerned about them and getting them established, De La Salle most likely would never have made those extraordinary sacrifices related above. The pious canon would have remained what he was. He would have answered God's call and fulfilled the duties of his vocation; he would have continued living like a saint, even as he had begun. But there are many degrees in sanctity, and he probably would not have attained the one he finally did achieve.

## De La Salle grieves at the death of Père Barré

The death of Nyel affords us an opportunity of also mentioning the death of Père Barré, which had occurred a year earlier, on 13 May 1686. The loss of this great religious was keenly felt by De La Salle. The two of them were moved by the same attraction and felt the same aspirations. Christian instruction and education for the young, abandoned to their unfortunate lot, was the goal pursued by the zeal of these two saintly men. Eager to establish Christian and Gratuitous Schools for poor boys and girls—the only remedy for their deep ignorance and their faulty upbringing—Barré and Nyel undertook projects which could succeed only through the death of their self-love. This common aim brought them together, but they differed in their respective manner of achieving it. Père Barré had received a special grace for founding schools for girls; he did not have it for schools for boys. That was reserved for De La Salle; such was his special charism.

The zeal of the pious Minim had, in fact, addressed itself to both aspects of the problem. More than once, he tried to establish schools for boys, but he never succeeded, because this gift had not been given to him. When he saw that it had been granted to De La Salle, far from experiencing any jealousy, he felt extremely happy. He rejoiced exceedingly when he beheld with his own eyes the man chosen by God to carry out an enterprise which he himself had so much at heart. All Père Barré longed for was to see the servant of God in Paris, laboring for the benefit of that great city and of the entire kingdom. In order to draw him there, he had invoked all of the authority he could exercise over his thinking. De La Salle, who considered the holy religious as a mouthpiece of the Holy Spirit and a man inspired by God

in everything that had to do with Christian education, would have conformed himself with his desires, heeded his call, and left for Paris at once if his spiritual director had not made him stay in Reims. If the saintly Minim did not experience the joy of seeing De La Salle at work in Paris during his own lifetime, he had it from heaven two years after he passed away. De La Salle's foundation was the object of his zeal until his last breath, and he joyfully saw the end of his life approaching when he learned of the rapid progress the work was making.

After all, if before men the saintly Minim cannot claim the glory for this foundation, he certainly deserves the merit for it before God. It was he who first conceived the idea of such schools, drew up plans for them, and actually started founding them. Nor is this all. Barré encouraged De La Salle to begin his Institute, guided him in the undertaking, supported him amid the difficulties and opposition which he at first encountered, and gave him the heroic advice to rid himself of his canonry and family wealth and distribute everything to the poor. Thus De Salle founded his Institute on nothing but Gospel poverty and the abandonment of himself and his followers to Divine Providence. In short, it was Barré who implanted in the holy Founder's soul the seeds of that sublime perfection that we admire. In God's sight, the holy Minim is the first creator of Christian Schools for the two sexes. He himself labored at establishing one kind and succeeded admirably. He inspired the other, guided the hand that laid its foundations, traced the plan, and contributed by his advice to the success of the enterprise. Finally, we can say that Barré left to De La Salle, as to his heir, the heritage of his spirit and of his charism.

Barré and De La Salle were two souls that Divine Providence drew together to work for the accomplishment of its designs. It led each of them by a different route to the same end; it brought them to the same goal by two different paths. Both died in the odor of sanctity, the one in Paris and the other in Rouen. The first of the two was a man remarkable for his works and his words, a great imitator of his holy Founder, Saint Francis de Paolo. Like him, he left his mark on various localities in France through the influence of his charity, zeal, humility, penance, and heavenly wisdom. The time has now come for us to observe the second of these two men begin a new phase of his career, in Paris, a phase sown with thorns and brambles, a true Way of the Cross.

Obedience alone had kept the holy Founder in Reims. His director insisted that his presence was needed there while the work was just beginning; hence his director opposed his departure, as we have seen. Nevertheless, his heart was in Paris, where Père Barré ardently

longed to see him establish his Community. The good of the Institute itself required this. Only its presence in the capital could make it known and help it spread throughout the kingdom. The city of Reims, where it had seen the light of day, would have become its tomb if it had not moved out. There the Institute could not have lived under its own laws, for it would have been subject to those that successive ecclesiastical superiors might have wanted to impose on it. Its constitution would have changed as often as these prelates replaced one another, and thus it would never have reached the stage of a fixed and definitive establishment.

Much less could it have dreamed of becoming a congregation, of asking Rome for recognition as a religious family by the approval of its rules and for authorization to make the three vows of religion. The head of the Institute, dependent on local ecclesiastical superiors who might not always have agreed with him, would have been subject to their caprices. He might have seen the subordination of his inferiors altered and his own authority weakened. His faith itself, along with that of the entire Community, might have suffered according to the mentalities of the different prelates and the diversity of their sentiments.[5]

Even if all these drawbacks had not been likely, the city of Reims, which had been the cradle of the Institute, could not have served as its proper environment when it began to grow. Only in the capital could it discover the contacts, protection, and assistance it needed. De La Salle was convinced of all this, but he waited for the hour marked out by Providence, whose humble servant he was. Not wishing to advance or to retard the appointed time, he remained tranquil, ready to leave at the first sign God gave him. With this in view, he had made all the necessary arrangements in the house so that everything would proceed as usual in his absence, without any disturbance.

This projected move, which De La Salle did not try to keep secret, eventually came to the ears of his archbishop, who by this time realized what a treasure he possessed and began to fear lest he might lose it. He had always loved this priest who had shown himself so submissive to his orders in all things and had sought approval for all his undertakings. True, he did not fully subscribe to the principles which inspired the heroic sacrifices De La Salle had made, and he considered as verging on folly the sublime wisdom of a man who gave up all his possessions, titles, and the amenities of life to make himself a victim of poverty and of the misery resulting from it. Still,

5. A veiled reference to bishops who were partial to Jansenism.

having given his consent to all this, he really could not criticize what he had permitted.

Archbishop Le Tellier, born to a fortune which provided him with immense revenues more like those of a king than of a private individual, never had a chance to learn by experience how to rely on the resources of Divine Providence, nor had he tasted the joy that an austere life affords. If he showed some initial irritation toward a man who was calling the priesthood back to its primitive poverty and giving the world examples of humility, detachment, and such other virtues—to find a parallel for which we must go back to the remotest centuries—he had time to change his mind and to realize that this priest, shorn of all his wealth, had been right to place his confidence in God and to rely on the treasury of Providence. To take care of the needs of his three communities, God furnished him greater resources than he could ever have found in his canonry, his personal fortune, and his family.

## The offer of Archbishop Le Tellier and its refusal

This prelate, who knew the art of governing and was an excellent judge of men's merits, rated De La Salle according to his work. Le Tellier could see the Community that the servant of God had gathered around him. He admired the progress it was making, and he hoped to use it for the benefit of his diocese. To do this, he sought to restrict the zeal of the Founder to the limits of the diocese and to keep him there himself. With this in mind, he felt that the surest way to attach him to the diocese of Reims was to appeal to the best interests of his Institute and to open to him the archiepiscopal purse to endow the Institute, expand it, and propagate it to every corner of the diocese, under the express condition that it would not go elsewhere.

If the offer was generous, the refusal was even more so, for the glory of God and the benefit of the Church would have suffered as a consequence of the archbishop's great liberality. The offer, however, was unable to touch a heart indifferent to everything that was not of God. Still, De La Salle needed arguments to motivate a refusal of this kind, some solid principle with which to back it up. Archbishop Le Tellier was a man who possessed good judgment. He was not an enemy of the greater good, nor was he so blindly attached to the interest of his particular diocese as to want to procure it at the expense of the general good. He seemed satisfied when De La Salle explained to him the true motives of his refusal and reminded the prelate of the obligation he felt to keep the promise made to De La Barmondière to establish a school in the parish of Saint Sulpice.

There was, moreover, another reason for the move, which De La Salle hinted at but did not mention: he was anxious to leave the city of his birth, where his family lived. A place which was beginning to change its attitude toward him—and where he no longer met with contempt—no longer attracted him. He even feared that if he stayed he might begin to be treated with honor and might end up with a reputation for holiness. Finally, under the eyes of his relatives, friends, and fellow citizens, he did not feel fully at liberty to give his zeal and his other virtues as much scope as he desired.

## De La Salle and his Brothers again invited to Paris

While the Spirit of God suggested all these thoughts to him, it was also preparing the way for him to move to Paris. Monsieur de La Barmondière, recalling what De La Salle had told him, again longed to see the promise fulfilled. Monsieur Compagnon, who had charge of the Saint Sulpice schools, desired it even more ardently. He had taken over this position from Monsieur Lespagnol, who had resigned when—with no help other than a young boy to manage a school with over two hundred pupils—he felt crushed by the burden. Desperate for help, he wrote to De La Salle in July 1687 and asked him to send him a Brother. The wise Superior was in a quandary over the reply he should make, for on the one hand, he had always made it a rule never to send a Brother alone on a mission. So important did he consider this principle that to be faithful to it, he had turned down several proposals to open schools in Champagne, as we have seen. On the other hand, the good of his Institute summoned him to Paris, and this call might open to him the gates of the capital.

Hesitant as to what he should do, he sent an inconclusive reply which betrayed his indecision. Compagnon, dissatisfied with this, left for Reims to talk with De La Salle in person and to urge him to send someone. Unfortunately for him, his journey proved useless, because the Founder was absent when Compagnon got to Reims, and he did not have time to await De La Salle's return. Divine Providence had arranged things in this way in order to bring about a firmer agreement, because it was with the parish priest himself, not with the man in charge of the Saint Sulpice parish schools, that the prudent Superior wished to arrange matters.

When De La Salle came back to Reims, he heard of Compagnon's visit and of its purpose. He did not wish to draw any conclusions of his own. His humility, which constantly led him to mistrust his own judgment and insights, obliged him to submit the matter to a tribunal

other than his own for judgment. There the difficulty was examined and the conclusion was reached to keep to the inviolable rule not to send any Brother out on a mission all by himself and to refuse even the most tempting offers unless two Brothers could be assigned to the project. Consequently, the pious Founder wrote to the head of the Saint Sulpice schools, saying that he would be satisfied if the parish priest consented to receive two Brothers and himself along with them. This condition was entirely agreeable to Compagnon, who disliked the responsibility he bore. It was to his advantage to see that De La Barmondière agreed to it, and in this he succeeded with little trouble. All he had to do was to show this saintly man where the real benefit was, in order to persuade him to embrace it.

Compagnon then wrote on behalf of the parish priest, telling De La Salle to come: he and the two Brothers would be welcome. The affair seemed to be taking a favorable turn, and De La Salle saw with pleasure that Divine Providence was opening for him the path to bring him to Paris. He did not, however, feel that the gate had been swung wide enough or that he should hurry the matter along. After all, it was only Compagnon who had written and made the arrangements. This did not suffice. He might be going too fast, pushing things too much, or perhaps ascribing to De La Barmondière what he really had not said, a thing that happens only too often with people who are overeager about something. They think they have heard what they really have not, and they lend their own convictions to those in whom they desire to see them.

De La Salle wished to receive a positive word from the pastor himself. To obtain this, he replied that his young brother Louis was about to set out for the Seminary of Saint Sulpice. He would make the arrangements and take all the measures needed to conclude them. So indeed it came about.

The seminarian came to an agreement with Compagnon and told him to let De La Salle know when he was expected in Paris. This was what Compagnon wanted, or so it would seem, yet this man who had at first been in so much of a hurry appeared to lose his sense of urgency at this point. Two months went by without sending any word to the Founder, who was waiting for it. After this lapse of time, when Compagnon did not see either De La Salle or the Brothers show up, as though astonished at the delay, he asked Louis for an explanation. Louis told him that his brother would not set out until he was called and told when he should come. This was obviously something the pastor, not Compagnon, should have attended to. The latter, thinking that a mere letter from himself would be sufficient assurance and that

it would bring De La Salle and the Brothers to Paris without delay, wrote to him at once.

The servant of God, who wanted and was waiting for an explicit order from the parish priest, did not move. When De La Barmondière learned why De La Salle delayed, he was much edified. The pastor was a great believer in the virtue of obedience. In his own career, he had given outstanding examples of it and was delighted to discover that there were still on earth men like himself who let all their steps be guided by this virtue. He commissioned Monsieur Baudran, in whose favor he was soon to resign his position as pastor, to inform De La Salle in his name that he and the two Brothers should come.

## Residence in Saint Sulpice; disorder in the school

Once he received this order, the Founder took his two disciples and set out for Paris to begin this long-desired foundation, one which was to cause him all sorts of trouble even to the end of his life. He arrived there with two Brothers on the eve of Saint Mathias day[6] in 1688. The saintly parish priest of Saint Sulpice welcomed them warmly and had them take up their lodging in the school building, where De La Barmondière, who was a great advocate of manual training, had set up a hosiery factory to furnish a trade to the poor children. Compagnon, who lived in the community of priests that officiated in the parish, took care to arrange for the Brothers' meals and introduced them to the young boy who had been his assistant teacher and to the man who ran the stocking factory, both of whom were lodged and took their meals in the same place.

The establishment was truly a bedlam where disorder and confusion reigned. There was no sign of any rule, of any kind of discipline or method so essential when dealing with a large number of students. The doors were open from 5 to 10 A.M. and from 1 to 4 P.M. The children came and went as they pleased. Nothing began or ended at a fixed time. Everything took place as chance or caprice dictated. Classes began sometimes at one hour, sometimes at another. Today they ended a little earlier, tomorrow they might end later. Catechism was rarely taught and never according to any system. Outside class time, the pupils gathered in the courtyard and played cards or dice. This gave rise to bad conduct, for it is well known how gambling arouses the passions and to what excesses it leads. On work days, the children missed Mass. No one ever thought of having them practice this

6. On 24, or possible 25, February; 1688 was a leap year.

greatest of religious duties, although De La Barmondière was eager that they should do so. There was no piety among the students, no good behavior in this assemblage of rowdy boys that was run by people who had no piety themselves.

As soon as De La Salle came into this situation, he could not help noting all this disorder and secretly bewailing it. He realized the evil clearly but could not see how to remedy it. The institution was in sad need of reform, but to bring this about, a great deal of effort would be required. When, how, and by what means could he improve things? That was what embarrassed him. His first glimpse of the place showed him the crosses awaiting him, but he kept silent and ordered the Brothers to do likewise. They were to meddle in no way but do their job, close their eyes to all the rest, abandon the future to Divine Providence, and allow God to choose the right time to bring order to a place where none existed and where it was so sorely needed.

He practiced to the letter what he urged the Brothers to do. All of them seemed deaf, blind, and dumb in a situation where the best thing to do for the time being was to shut their eyes so as to remain at peace amidst the disorder. Nevertheless, after a few days of rest, the two Brothers began to work along with the young boy who had been employed previously to teach the youngsters. To make their efforts more effective, they divided the school population into three classes and gave them lessons on a level with their age and their ability. This first attempt at organization, which did not create any difficulties, attracted so many new students that the two Brothers were overworked. One of them even fell ill and remained so exhausted that he was no longer able to do anything. This empty place was soon filled. De La Salle had not forgotten a function which he had already practiced. The Superior who once before had taken a Brother's place in Reims now did the same in Paris. It was only fair that Paris should not have to envy Reims such an example of humility and that both should behold a priest, doctor, and former canon of one of the most illustrious metropolitan churches in France become a schoolmaster.

The presence of De La Salle was enough to make Compagnon confront the disorder in the school. He was not in a position to attend to this himself, since he did not remain much at the school, and even if he had lived there, he did not feel that he had the ability to introduce and maintain strict discipline among the many students who needed it so badly. This was an art which he knew nothing about, and even if he did, he was probably not the sort of man who was ready to accept with due patience and longanimity the unpleasantness it entailed. The simplest and best thing he could have done,

which he finally did do, was to ask De La Salle to replace him and to take charge of the establishment. But the humble Superior could read in the heart of the man who was making him such a flattering offer a secret unwillingness to give up his position and an inclination to take back his proposal.

After seeking advice on the matter, De La Salle turned down the suggestion in the most Christian and modest manner possible. He again ordered the Brothers not to concern themselves with anything except teaching their classes. The Brothers, however, began to grow tired of the disorder which led to all sorts of inconveniences for them. They were accustomed to a definite series of exercises which followed each other. They grew disenchanted at having to be the helpless spectators of the anarchy which added to their own work and which they could see no end to. Their virtue, thus put to the test, began to give way. To bolster it, they needed both the example of their Superior, who saw all that was going on yet did not complain, and the exhortations urging patience that he addressed to them. He encouraged them not to let these thorny beginnings discourage them; he led them to hope that time would eventually bring more order to these chaotic classes, lessen the annoyances they suffered, and smooth out the difficulties they experienced. He knew the remedy that needed to be applied, but he did not want to forestall the hour marked out by Providence.

In the meantime, he contented himself with visiting the classes, being present in the schoolyard, teaching the children Christian doctrine, and trying to win them over through his mildness: suggesting modesty to them by his presence and his love for what was right by his words. The seeds of virtue he thus sowed in these young souls did not take long to spring up and promised good results. Little by little, the children became more docile, and their behavior improved. The director of the school noticed it, and this slight change made him realize what a wiser line of conduct and a definite regulation might do to ameliorate the situation in the school.

## The pastor comes to visit the school and sees the disorder

Things went on in this way until the beginning of April, at which time the parish priest came to visit the school, accompanied by one of his priests, named Monsieur Metais. This saintly pastor, while governing such a vast parish where problems abounded, lived an austere life and displayed as much regularity of conduct as the most fervent ecclesiastic in the Seminary of Saint Sulpice. He himself was one of the

most notable members of this congregation. He loved order and was zealous about regulations. Consequently, he was badly impressed by the lack of discipline he noted in an institution which needed it so badly. He realized quite well that it was useless to gather so many children together at such great expense in order to teach them their religion, prepare them to earn a living, and bring them up in the fear of God, as long as there was not more discipline among them. He felt that most of them might be better off at home, with no concern for their education, rather than gathered in such an unruly mob. At home they would learn less about evil and would not witness so much bad example.

These reflections led the pastor to conclude that he should either close the school entirely or introduce firmer discipline among the students and make order and regularity reign. After thinking seriously about how he could correct the evil, he realized that he had the solution to the problem at hand in the person of De La Salle. The latter possessed to perfection the art of running a school well. God, who had destined him for this type of work, had given him the talent to do it right. He had communicated this talent to the Brothers, so that they fulfilled the task with ease. The only reason why De La Barmondière had the Brothers come to Paris was that his parish might share in the blessings that accompanied their labors. To obtain these blessings, all he needed to do was to leave them alone to run the school, and this the zealous parish priest of Saint Sulpice resolved to do. He begged De La Salle to take charge, and when the Founder pointed out that two Brothers could not cope with all the work to be done, the pastor consented to have others come, as many as might be needed, and agreed to pay each of them a salary of 250 livres.

Compagnon, who was in charge of the school, was present and suffered no little mortification from what he heard, and he was very hurt when he was invited not to concern himself any more with anything referring to the school. This order wounded him deeply, and De La Salle had to bear the consequences of it. We shall see to what lengths Compagnon was led by resentment and jealousy. The Founder, entirely submissive to the orders of the parish priest, consented, although with reluctance, to do what was required of him, for he could easily foresee the problems that would arise on the part of Compagnon and his two associates.

Understanding perfectly well what caused the unrest in the school, De La Salle knew that he would never get the classes organized as he wished and establish proper order in them as long as the hosiery workshop remained in operation as it was. This institution

was the apple of the pastor's eye. He was full of zeal in this matter and believed it to be extremely important to train young people to work, thus avoiding idleness, the mother of all vices. The time had not yet come, therefore, to speak about doing away with the shop program. It would be necessary to await the right moment and, in the meantime, to keep it going.

## De La Salle introduces order; Compagnon becomes jealous

Placed in charge of running both the house and the school, De La Salle, as was his wont, had recourse primarily to prayer and meditation so as to carry out successfully the mission entrusted to him. Resolved to introduce order in everything and everywhere, he adopted all the measures that wisdom suggested in order to succeed in his endeavor without making much ado or provoking comments. Since the Brothers should be models of conformity to rule, it was only right to begin the reorganization of the school with them. Their example alone might suffice to reform the student body. Consequently, the pious Founder's first care was to live with the Brothers in Paris just as he had done in Reims. Nothing was changed in their way of life: the same exercises, the same regularity, the same spirit of recollection, silence, retirement, prayer, mortification, and obedience.

Next, he undertook to schedule the time for all the school activities so that each one began at a fixed hour and lasted a definite time. The first rule that had to be enforced concerned entering and leaving the building at a precise time. Once this was decided, the door was opened and closed regularly at that exact hour, so that the students were obliged to be punctual and to show themselves faithful to their duty. The lazy ones who came late found the door shut and could not get in, and the mischief makers who wanted to run off when they pleased found themselves locked in and could not get out.

The praiseworthy practice of hearing Mass every day was introduced and became a fixed rule of the Christian Schools and a new and edifying spectacle for Paris. Hundreds of children, boisterous by character, playful and irreverent, lacking piety and respect for the holy place, could be seen walking two by two in order, each in his proper place with silence and modesty, preceded and followed by the Brothers, all going to attend the awesome sacrifice of the altar with piety and reverence. Nor was the catechism lesson forgotten or neglected. Its length, the time when it was taught, and the manner of teaching it were all regulated. This holy practice, which is what distinguishes Christian and Gratuitous Schools from ordinary pay schools, seemed

so essential to Barré and to De La Salle that both of them obliged their teachers to teach catechism every day. The periods for teaching reading, writing, arithmetic, and spelling were also precisely determined so that the children had enough time to learn these matters well without ever getting bored.

The rest of the day was devoted to manual training but in such a way as to sanctify it, for prayer was joined to labor. This did not yet suffice, for these boys, living subject to no restraints, had grown licentious and had become addicted to gambling. There was no hope that these young plants would ever produce good fruit as long as they were affected by this vice. This dreadful passion acted like a cancer in them, dried up the sap of good instructions, and corrupted the depths of their hearts. It was necessary to attempt everything to cure it, and this De La Salle and the Brothers proceeded to do. Finally, since the end of their Institute is to bring up in innocence and in the service of God these neglected children who lack instruction and education, they gave free rein to their zeal and sought to uproot the vices and evil inclinations found in these young souls and to plant therein piety along with the fear and love of God.

The schools of Saint Sulpice soon seemed to be running so well that the enemy of the human race was frightened and hastened to put a stop to this good work. He thought it would be easy for him to succeed, since he had at his disposal three persons who were all the more apt to serve him because their interests coincided with his and their passions fell in with his evil schemes. Two of the three were not happy over the new regulations, and the third considered them as a slur on his honor. It was he who guided the intrigue which aimed at closing down the knitting shop, the activity which he thought was the mainspring that actuated the zeal of M. de La Barmondière for the school. Convinced that the saintly parish priest, who was so keen on manual training, would be displeased with any teachers who failed to promote it, Compagnon used all his cleverness to bring his wicked project to a satisfactory conclusion. The undertaking, however, must not be too rushed; he had to await the moment when it could be tried with certainty of success. So he slyly sought to gain time; meanwhile, to prepare his vengeance, he contented himself with showing by his gloomy silence what he felt in the depths of his soul and with provoking complaints and murmurs.

We shall see by this example that passion is blind and that jealousy, above all, seldom delivers a blow which does not ricochet off the cowardly heart that indulges in it. If Compagnon had paid attention to his own reputation, he would no doubt have realized that it

was going to suffer as much as that of De La Salle. It was he who had shown himself so eager to bring the servant of God from Reims to Paris, had gone to Reims to beg him to come, had convinced the parish priest to invite him, had been so glad to give De La Salle the direction of the schools, and had urged him, in the presence of De La Barmondière, to assume control of the establishment. Nobody was more interested than he in the success of the schools placed under De La Salle's direction. The honor or dishonor deserved by the one would infallibly reflect on the other. If he had thought about it a little, he would have seen that he was working against himself by plotting against the holy Founder. But where envy rules, faith and reason have to remain silent. This odious vice, which finds satisfaction only in causing trouble, often enough at its own expense, thought it had perceived in the slackening off of the work in the knitting shop a pretext to satisfy itself.

The students were spending more time in their school activities, in prayer, catechism, and attending Mass, and consequently could not devote as many hours as before to manual training. The man in charge of the shop thought he was losing money. As less work was turned out, his profits diminished. Convinced that all these new arrangements were harming his interests, he grew impatient over these losses. At first, he did not dare to make too much of a fuss over it or to give vent to overly loud complaints which would have revealed his secret dissatisfaction. De La Barmondière was not a man before whom passion dared to show itself too openly, so he had to dissimulate. In order to cause trouble cleverly and in such a way as to convince the holy old parish priest, he did not complain about the new regulations as such but about the diminution of work.

The ploy was ingenious because it aimed only indirectly at the object that he really had in view. It seemed that De La Barmondière's verdict would certainly condemn the actions of De La Salle and that being displeased over the lessened amount of work given to the children, he would insist that the new arrangements be canceled, thus bringing everything back to where it had stood before. The scheme, however, did not succeed as its authors expected. The pastor did not show himself as sympathetic to their complaints as they had hoped. If the manual training did not run quite as well as before, the classes were proceeding much better, the children were being taught, and their behavior improved considerably, so the gains balanced out the loss; the one more than compensated for the other. Thus the saintly parish priest, who wanted to see the greatest good done, did not seem too much disturbed over what was, after all, a minor matter.

The plotters felt this and decided to take steps to arouse deeper concern on his part. They thought that if the work in the knitting shop stopped entirely, this would have the effect they had vainly hoped to secure by stressing the slowdown of the operation, and they thought that De La Barmondière would finally make up his mind to withdraw the direction of the institution from a man who could not make the shop function. Nothing was more contrary to the interests of the Christian Schools than this scheme inspired by pure malice. It should have succeeded according to the desires of its authors, but God, who makes those who dig the pit fall into it themselves and takes pleasure in foiling the projects of the wicked, made this plot turn against the one who had planned it. Rafrond, the foreman of the knitting shop, thought that by quitting he would force it to close down and thus oblige De La Salle to call him back in order to make it run again. This was how he and Compagnon, who secretly incited him, expected to place the pastor in a difficult situation and to make him accept their terms, the first of which was to send De La Salle and the Brothers back to Reims.

They were both disappointed, and Rafrond was led into ruin by his own malice. At first, he spoke of quitting. Then he did quit, in fact, but it turned out so much the worse for him, because he found neither any other work nor anyone who cared to employ him. The shop closed down; De La Barmondière did not seem to mind. Then De La Salle thought of reopening it and having it function successfully without causing any disturbance to the classes, and in this he succeeded. Rafrond, abandoned to his unfortunate lot, was the one whom the servant of God made use of to insure the success of his new project. With the parish priest's approval, he gave Rafrond a sum of money to teach one of the Brothers how to knit hose and how to run the whole manual training program. In three weeks' time, the Brother had learned all that the teacher could teach, making his services superfluous. Thus the malicious intriguer was the first to pay for his evil intentions. The Brother took charge of the program, along with another whom De La Salle called from Reims and who already knew how to knit hose. The two of them were able to combine the work program with the running of the classes and the other activities. Indeed, the shop program proceeded even better than before and brought in more profit, because the children were less distracted and more enthusiastic about their work and applied themselves to it more diligently. The class work and the exercises of piety no longer suffered from it, because silence and order economized a great deal of time which previously had been wasted in playing and in useless talk.

# Chapter VIII

*The head of the Saint Sulpice schools calumniates De La Salle in a gathering of the Ladies of Charity; the pastor is deceived and is on the verge of sending De La Salle back to Reims with his Brothers, but God changes his heart just as the pious Founder was taking his leave; justice is finally done; Monsieur Baudran, the successor of De La Barmondière as pastor of Saint Sulpice, establishes a second school in the parish, which gives rise to a lawsuit that the pious Founder wins against the Masters of the Little Schools.*

Monsieur Compagnon was not discouraged by the collapse of the intrigue he had fomented. Even though he was not recognized as its author, his conscience made him feel the shame for it, while Rafrond bore the consequences. Compagnon's jealousy was not ready to admit defeat. Real ill will, which the spirit of envy knows so well how to utilize, finds a ready tool in calumny. It was an odious and abominable tool, but as no other was available, he had to have recourse to it or else resign himself to seeing with equanimity the control of the institution in the hands of a man whom he would have wished to see far removed from it.

Everything now was in order in the school; the manual work proceeded smoothly, as did the teaching. Piety itself was being cultivated little by little, and everything contributed to the repute of the Superior who was in charge. Hence there was no way to attack him, save through slander. Because the presence of De La Salle would have sufficed to dissipate this, Compagnon hesitated and thought it wiser to profit by his absence to make the lies sound more plausible. He might have carried them from house to house, but then they would have taken a good while to reach the ears of the parish priest. So it seemed more expedient to make them public and by choosing a favorable moment to divulge the calumny, to give it the credit of several different voices.

A meeting of the Ladies of Charity which took place about this time at the pastor's residence seemed to Compagnon an ideal forum in which to speak and to be listened to. If it proved possible to convince the pious persons who attended this meeting, it was certain that their number and their reputation would carry De La Barmondière along with them in their accusations against De La Salle. Such a favorable opportunity was not allowed to pass by. The impostor had

taken pains to clothe his fabrications in a garb of seeming plausibility and to give them all the appearance of truth. He succeeded in putting them forward with so much skill and cleverness that nobody dreamed of suspecting falsehood, still less of attributing the tale to the envy and resentment of the one who related it.

We do not know what the malicious accusation actually was, but we do know that it produced all the effect that its author expected. It was believed, and what was most amazing, De La Barmondière himself remained convinced of it. It is a fact that the most upright people are often the least on guard against being deceived. Not knowing what resentment, passion, and jealousy are, they cannot imagine that these vices may move the tongues of those whose hearts they cannot see. The saintly parish priest of Saint Sulpice, a lover of simplicity, candor, good faith, and truth, could not even suspect that these virtues were being betrayed by a man who was trusted by himself and by many other persons of distinguished merit, so he let himself be persuaded. This was not the first time that one saint, by persecuting another saint, helped add to the other's crown.

The calumny had plenty of time to spread and to meet with acceptance, and from July to September, its author enjoyed the malicious pleasure of adding more details calculated to win for it even wider belief. Compagnon saw all his desires about to be fulfilled, and to savor a more complete triumph, he went about the school spreading the word that the Brothers and their Superior were going to be sent home and showing how happy he felt over this. He had brought the parish priest to that point.

It was not difficult for De La Salle to notice the changed attitude. De La Barmondière showed himself cold, even rude, by his calculated indifference, giving him to understand that he would do well to leave of his own accord and not wait for the disgrace of being dismissed. In fact, De La Barmondière, wishing to spare him this ultimate humiliation, made this very suggestion to him through Monsieur Baudran, the spiritual director of the one so persecuted though innocent. Baudran gave De La Salle to understand that since the pastor was apparently not satisfied with him, prudence suggested that he take advantage of the imminent vacation period and go back to Reims. He added that he himself was ready to go with him to the parish priest so that he could bid him farewell.

The Founder, who sought nothing but God and who in all things abandoned himself to the care of Providence, agreed. I do not know what sort of impression this farewell made on De La Barmondière, but once he listened to him, he was no longer in such a hurry to send

him and the Brothers away. He appeared pensive and after conferring with Baudran about the matter, remained quite undecided as to what he should do. He told De La Salle that he would think over the question further. "He will think about it for three more years, at least, without changing anything," Baudran told De La Salle when he returned. "So remain as you are, in peace." This was what De La Salle resolved to do. Calm in the midst of all this agitation, not knowing one night whether he would sleep in the same house the next, he remained at rest in the arms of Divine Providence, ready for whatever might happen.

Meanwhile, Compagnon did not remain idle. His mind kept trying to invent new ways to blacken the pious Superior's reputation and to dispose De La Barmondière against him and the Brothers. He spied on all they did, tried to read their intentions, and scrutinized their conduct. Nothing about them was innocent. His passion made a crime of everything, and without apprising them of it, he continually cited them before the tribunal of the parish priest or that of the community of priests who served in the parish, renewing his accusations against them and hoping to force them to leave Paris. This tissue of calumnies which he presented as proof constituted his whole case against the unjustly accused Brothers, and the renewed zeal he displayed for the good of the school served to verify his hypocrisy. In fact, emulation combined with evil intentions made him active and vigilant, eager to rival De La Salle and to appear more capable than he was of directing the school and inspiring the students with piety.

De La Barmondière liked to see the children attend the early Mass, so one way of currying favor with him was to make the students show up at church early in the morning to be present at his Mass. To get them to do this, the scheming Compagnon did not spare cajolements, caresses, or rewards, and he bought the cooperation of the children by his calculated liberalities. To secure funds for this purpose, he persuaded certain pious persons to turn over to him the money they wished to donate to charity and to let him decide how these sums were to be spent. For the same purpose, he laid his hands on the loaves of bread which were offered at the seminary and brought them to school, so that he could distribute them to the boys he wished to favor. He did this in the sight of the other pupils, in order to get more of them to come to the early Mass, and he gave them to understand that if they wished to share in his largesse, they should rally around him and not around the newly arrived Brothers.

## De La Salle's defense is silence; his enemy is confounded

Unruffled, De La Salle beheld all that was being done against him and defended himself only by his silence and patience. It would have been easy for him to oblige all the children to put in an appearance at the early Mass and to have them conducted there by the Brothers. Even without making this a rule, he would have managed to get them all to come willingly and voluntarily, but this would have been too human a manner of acting. He would have been inspired by purely human motives, and a saint finds this repugnant. Far from doing anything of the sort, he forbade the Brothers to do or to say anything special or out of the ordinary to win over the children and to get them to come to the early Mass. "You should urge them to go," he told them, "and recommend that they do so out of regard for God and for their salvation, and let it go at that."

In vain had the man responsible for the schools exhausted all the wiles suggested by ill will in order to defame the servant of God. When he opened a door through which he hoped to expel De La Salle from the institution, he really provided the one through which he himself would be ejected in disgrace. Was it not just that he should be caught in the web of intrigue which he had spun and that he should experience the truth of the saying, *Calumniators will never prosper on the earth*? Here is what finally happened. In order to put an end to the conflicts existing between the persons he had entrusted with the direction of the school, De La Barmondière asked Monsieur Janson, who later became an archbishop, to probe the matter for him, to find out the cause of the trouble, and to discover who was at the bottom of all the dissension. Accordingly, the pious priest came to investigate, and it did not take him long to find out who was innocent. The order and regularity which he observed in the school seemed to him an element favoring the one who directed it. The children were polite, busy, orderly; the Brothers were silent, modest, recollected.

All this spoke volumes in favor of the accused and without many words, but with a power superior to human eloquence, it demonstrated that he was in the right and that he had been the victim of calumny. The virtuous priest, not wishing to allow himself to be led astray by first impressions, returned to the house several times and was always similarly edified by what he saw. What he admired most was that De La Salle and the Brothers did not say a word to clear themselves of the imputations spread against them. He beheld men who remained calm, leaving to Providence the care of clearing their names, and whose only defense was silence.

In such circumstances, silence is both a mark of genuine and perfect virtue and a convincing apology for innocence. But how many victories must we have achieved over self-love before we can make it remain silent and not give way to recriminations! How deeply must a heart have yielded to the Holy Spirit not to seem perturbed over unjust judgments made against it! Janson was even more edified—upon urging De La Salle to defend himself and to end his silence with regard to his declared enemy, who no longer observed any measure in attacking him—when he heard him say that since he was not in charge of Compagnon's behavior, he had neither examined it nor judged it. The virtuous priest finally understood what manner of man this was about whose conduct he had been asked to inquire, when he told him that "the only favor he requested was that the defects observed in his conduct might be pointed out to him and that he might be given the advice he needed to correct them."

This humble attitude made the investigator understand where passion lay, and where virtue. He realized what sort of man this was whose virtue had been so long put to the test by odious calumnies, who yet did not want to open his mouth to complain about the author of these tales. He therefore lost no time in doing him justice and in opening the eyes of De La Barmondière. Monsieur Janson declared to the pastor the high esteem he himself had conceived for a man who remained so unruffled with regard to those who were the enemies of peace, a man who answered nothing to the lies and impostures which had been so freely heaped upon him.

The saintly parish priest, now better informed, returned to his earlier feelings toward the Brothers and their Superior. He began taking steps to protect him from these annoyances and make it possible for him to run the school without opposition or further interference. Since De La Barmondière resigned his position as parish priest just about this time, it fell to his successor, Monsieur Baudran, to carry out this project. The task could not have been entrusted to more capable hands, because Baudran was the spiritual director of the innocent victim of all these slanderous tales, and better than anyone else, he knew his eminent virtue. In order to act with full deliberation, he took all the time he needed to familiarize himself with the turmoil that agitated the school. Baudran assumed charge of the parish in January 1689 and spent the year examining Compagnon's conduct in detail. When the examination showed him that this ecclesiastic was good for nothing except for introducing disorder and dissension into a house where such good order now reigned, he waited only until an opportunity arose for getting him out of the way as honorably as possible.

This came about soon afterward, when the priest in charge of the altar boys of the parish died. At Christmas of that same year, Compagnon was given charge of their training.

Delivered from an enemy who had shown himself so implacable and dangerous, De La Salle exhibited no outward sign of joy. He never sought to revenge himself on him for all the evil he had suffered, except by doing him all sorts of favors. He used the period of peace given to him to restore to his house all the fervor and to the school all the discipline he wished to see in them. Although eager to establish good order in the classrooms, the Founder had not enjoyed full authority to introduce all the pious practices that he wished to see established there. The time had finally come to do this and have them accepted. He made good use of it.

This increase of order and discipline in the Saint Sulpice school caused a considerable influx of new pupils. Children came streaming in, so that soon the classrooms were no longer large enough to accommodate them. The boys were growing used to the regulations and became more docile, more attentive, more religious, and the change in them showed what good a Christian School can do when it is well conducted. The servant of God himself was gratified at the blessings God poured out on his labors and did not cease to bless him and thank him for them. The new parish priest was no less pleased when he came to visit the classes. Seeing the good done, he could not restrain his joy, and he felt a stronger determination to support and multiply the schools. At this time, he resolved to open a new school in the rue du Bac, near the Pont Royal. He suggested this to De La Salle, who was happy to go along with the idea. In fact, it was he who had first thought of this foundation and had mentioned it to De La Barmondière, but the idea had not been pursued at that time. This new school was opened early in 1690. Baudran was delighted, for he soon saw it filled with students and producing all the good results he had hoped for.

## He emerges victorious from persecution by the schoolmasters

De La Salle had thought that he would enjoy a period of peace and that it would last for a while; he could not foresee anything that might disturb it. He hoped to profit by this season of tranquillity and use it to consolidate his work, but he was mistaken. The Founder did not realize how much alarm his Institute was causing in hell nor how many stumbling blocks of all sorts the prince of this world would try to throw into his path. In truth, the old serpent, so clever at fomenting

evil and in thwarting all endeavors which aim at the glory of God, exhausted against this one all the resources of his malignant ingenuity. He had just stirred up dissensions within the school. No sooner had these been allayed than he began to promote attacks from without. For a dangerous and hidden enemy, he was about to substitute another in the shape of an entire corporation which would wage open warfare.

The recent past had brought De La Salle conflict with internal enemies. The coming years would be marked by external hostilities. The former pastor of Saint Sulpice had sided with his enemies; the new parish priest will attack him in a more dangerous and painful fashion. And the beginnings of all these troubles were only the preludes to others more vast, the first stirring of a persistent opposition which would endure as long as his life.

Jealousy had just made the servant of God feel the sting of a tongue as sharp as that of a serpent; now self-interest was going to induce the Corporation of Paris Schoolmasters to take up arms against the Christian Schools. These mercenary pedagogues, who lived thanks to their teaching and whose pens provided them with a livelihood, were dismayed by the success and progress achieved by the Christian and Gratuitous Schools. They imagined they could already see their own establishments shut down as a result of the founding of the former. Those schoolmasters who taught in the neighborhood of the parish schools began to see their revenues dropping, and it was natural for them to feel concern lest the Brothers' classes should be filled with children previously enrolled in theirs.

A perfervid and hypersensitive imagination made them think that in a short time they would find themselves alone in empty classrooms and that they would have to endure the confusion of seeing their schools deserted while those of the Brothers flourished. What a bitter pill it was to see themselves supplanted by these newcomers who would certainly reduce them and their families to the poorhouse by changing into a work of charity what had hitherto been a lucrative profession! Must we, they asked, let ourselves be ruined by these interlopers who, under the name of Brothers, have come to destroy our profession? Was it not obvious that the Gratuitous Schools would empty those where fees were charged and that parents, who are willing to spend money on everything for their children except for their education, would bring them, one and all, to these teachers who taught out of charity?

These ill-founded arguments caused much emotion among all the schoolmasters of Paris, and without examining how much was false in

all of this, they followed the impression created by their passions, inflamed by their prejudices. If they had been willing to calm down and consider the purpose of the Gratuitous Schools objectively, they would have recognized that these schools are open only to the poor who have no means of paying for an education. Because such children were in no position to enrich their teachers, they had always been neglected. There never had been any great effort made to bring them into the Little Schools or those of the writing masters. Men who sell their services expect nothing from people who have nothing to give them in return; they are more apt to drive the poor away from their establishments than to invite them in. What then did the schoolmasters have to fear from the new teachers who welcomed to their schools only the youngsters who often lacked bread as much as they lacked instruction? Should they not rather have been grateful to the Brothers for taking charge of a whole category of children whom the world calls scum?

But, the schoolmasters replied, the richer children are also admitted along with the poor, and thus we suffer a loss when they go to the Charity Schools to be instructed gratuitously. This was the only objection with any substance that the masters could make to the Brothers. It was, however, not difficult to refute. To send one's child to a school which caters expressly to the destitute is to declare oneself poor. Now if even the poorest people are reluctant to admit their penury, would well-to-do people try to pass for beggars? Do we not know how pride revolts against everything that smacks of destitution? It simply passes belief that parents able to pay for their children's education would go to beg for it from Charity Schools.

Furthermore, it not infrequently happens that people who seem comfortably situated are not really such. Had the schoolmasters verified the financial status of the children who left them to go to the Brothers' schools? How many are the children in these schools who need someone to give them food rather than to ask them for money! Again, nothing in this world is exempt from drawbacks. If a few well-off parents did send their children to the Brothers' schools, they did so at the expense of their self-respect. Abuses can crop up everywhere; it is not possible to prevent all of them. Certainly, the Brothers had no business asking their pupils to prove that they were indeed poor. By enrolling them in these schools, their families publicly admitted as much. The admission was well known; consequently, no one could deny their claim of being poor.

Finally, even supposing that a few well-to-do children did find their way into the Christian Schools among the poor, no great harm

would be done. On the contrary, it would be a disgraceful and disastrous thing to abandon a whole class of children to ignorance and a vicious way of life by expelling the Brothers. After all, the schoolmasters, too, are part of the general public, which has the highest interest in the establishment of Christian and Gratuitous Schools. The multiplication of these schools is of such capital importance for church and state that those who are members of both these societies should not hesitate to sacrifice a minor advantage of theirs to procure this great benefit for the public at large.

The Parisian schoolmasters, therefore, were needlessly alarmed over the establishment of the Christian Schools. They failed to reflect that these schools were filled with children who would not have been admitted to their own establishments, since they were unable to pay for the instruction given there. They fancied that they saw financial ruin staring them in the face and that their families would be reduced to beggary unless they hastened to have expelled from the city these men who did not charge anything for teaching the poor. Moreover, they were encouraged in their attitude by the person in charge of the Saint Sulpice schools, of whom mention has already been made.

Since through his slanders and his secret intrigues he had not been able to have De La Salle and the Brothers sent away from a position to which he himself had called them, Compagnon thought he could achieve his ends by stirring up and encouraging the schoolmasters. Without losing time, they had recourse to legal and to direct action. First, they caused everything in the schools to be seized; then they subpoenaed the Brothers and their Superior and filed suit against them on the pretext that they were violating the Corporation's privileges and that without any right to do so, they were taking it upon themselves to teach school. The first hearing was held before the tribunal of the Precentor,[7] and a sentence was handed down in favor of the schoolmasters and against the Christian and Gratuitous Schools.

This incident came close to disrupting the plans of the holy Founder completely and might have stifled his work at its inception. The distaste De La Salle felt for lawsuits tied his hands. He would have preferred to abandon the entire enterprise, if he could have done so without betraying God's cause. He could not bring himself to go to court, and he seriously considered yielding to the complaints of his adversaries. It was, however, pointed out to De La Salle that his cause

7. The Precentor (*Écolâtre* or *Grand Chantre* in French), a sort of Diocesan Supervisor of Schools, was the official protector of the "Little Schools" to defend their rights and privileges.

was also the cause of all the poor children and of the public. Their rights, too, were involved, not merely his. After taking charge of the instruction of these poor, miserable, and ignorant boys, could he, without falling into cowardice and pusillanimity, let them return to their first state of ignorance and lack of education? The same charity which had made him renounce everything in order to found a society of Brothers dedicated to the Christian and gratuitous instruction of the needy would be wounded if he failed to defend their rights. It demanded that he make himself their advocate after being their educator. He should have foreseen that these greedy men would not fail to look with jealous eyes on the Christian Schools he was setting up, would sound the alarm and cry out to high heaven; foreseeing this, he should not have expected them to give up their attacks and come to terms with men whom they considered their rivals.

After all, an unjust lawsuit was merely one more cross. A man who had already borne so many others should not refuse this one if Providence placed it on his shoulders. Finally, his spiritual director told him it was his duty in conscience to uphold God's cause, which was also that of the poor. This made him give in. Convinced that this was God's will, he pursued the case, appealed against the first sentence, and in a short time the matter was concluded in his favor. It is true that the public was on his side. The good that the Christian and Gratuitous Schools were doing was obvious and worked in his favor. Everybody realized that the poor were the only ones who had anything to fear from losing this lawsuit which affected them so closely. It was clear that closing the Christian Schools would have been to give victory to these unjust passions at the expense of religion and charity.

I almost forgot to mention that De La Salle also owed his success in this case to prayer and to the intercession of the Most Blessed Virgin. To obtain the protection of the holy Mother of God in this affair, he brought the Brothers to the shrine of Our Lady of Virtues, a much frequented place of pilgrimage, two leagues from Paris. He celebrated Mass there, and all the Brothers received Communion. Almost the entire morning was spent in prayer; they remained at the shrine for three hours. The day ended as it had begun, in silence, prayer, and recollection. Some crusts of bread were the only nourishment that they consumed during this exhausting day-long journey. As for their Superior, he came home fasting and ate nothing until evening.

## Difficulty over the habit of the Brothers

As soon as De La Salle found himself rid of this ticklish affair, he was caught up in another—the first in that long series of crosses which he had to shoulder as long as he stayed in the parish of Saint Sulpice. Enemies and rivals of his work had just invoked the law against him. No sooner had he obtained a favorable sentence than friends and protectors of his Institute launched another campaign against him. In the earlier instance, he had been cited before a tribunal where the judges were not on the side of his accusers; he was heard, his arguments were listened to, and he won his case. In the more recent matter, he was summoned before a tribunal which was favorable to him personally but opposed to his spirit and his convictions. Here he found that his judge was the very one who wanted the Brothers to change their habit.

The pious Founder, who had received inspiration and graces concerning the government of his Community which the prominent men who opposed him had not, foresaw the consequences of such a change and resisted it. However highly he regarded the authority of the person who was promoting the change, he felt that it was supremely important to withstand it and to back up his opposition by solid reasons. All those who came to know the subject of this controversy agreed with his arguments and adopted his opinion, but this did not prevent him from suffering for his victory through a drying up of charitable donations and through his being accorded a reputation as a stubborn and pigheaded man.

We must state things as they are. The person whom he had to contradict was a man who enjoyed great esteem in Paris and was well thought of. The Brothers' habit, at the time so unusual and which drew down on them the raillery of the common people and the derision of the worldly, he found displeasing. He was afraid that this lack of respect for the Brothers personally might extend to their ministry. His zeal for the Christian and Gratuitous Schools, which were beginning to produce their benefits in his parish, made him eager not to let them be compromised by the disfavor shown to the teachers on account of the unusual type of garb they wore, garb which no one liked.

This great man, whose merits equalled his reputation, felt—as did many other persons—that De La Salle should not remain so inflexible about modifying external details which did not really affect the interior. Since the habit does not make the monk, the Founder should not have been so set on the Brothers' garb, which attracted attention by its outlandish appearance and only made people laugh at and ridicule

those who wore it. Baudran, as pastor of the parish where the Christian Schools were located, as their protector and benefactor, and as the spiritual director of the servant of God, felt that he had a right to impose this change and to demand this act of submission and condescension from De La Salle. He wanted the Brothers to adopt the long ecclesiastical mantle and habit. If he was alone in favoring this particular solution to the problem, the public in general agreed with him in clamoring for a change of some kind. People at large, however, were ignorant of the weighty reasons which had led De La Salle to give to the Brothers' habit the appearance it possessed. These reasons are so cogent that they convince anyone who reads them with an open mind.

Thinking, no doubt, that Baudran, who desired only what was best, who loved De La Salle and was genuinely interested in his work, would understand his reasons and accept them, the servant of God took up his pen once more to state fully and clearly the reasons which had induced him to give the Brothers their special habit. He drew up a memorandum on the subject.[8] This document seemed to be so logically thought out and so strongly worded that the person to whom the holy Founder showed it and whose advice he sought urged him to remain firm on this point. It is true that De La Salle does not tell us the identity of this person whom he consulted, saying only that he was considered very wise. But by this laudatory epithet, he really indicated the celebrated superior of the Seminary of Saint Sulpice, Monsieur Tronson, whose prudence was widely acknowledged throughout France.

It was to Tronson that De La Salle had recourse in all his major difficulties, considering him as a source of enlightenment and as a man who had the reputation of being one of the oracles of the French clergy. Since De La Salle had been one of his students and had the good fortune of being under his guidance while at the seminary and since Tronson combined great depth of knowledge and penetration of mind with a high degree of humility and virtue, it was only natural for him to ask his advice. As long as Tronson lived, he did in fact turn to him for counsel and often went to discuss matters with him at the seminary at Issy, where Tronson then lived. When De La Salle could not secure the advice of this enlightened man, he would consult Monsieur Boüin, then director of the Seminary of Saint Sulpice, whose holiness was recognized by all those who dealt with him.

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8. The manuscript of this document in the Founder's own hand is in the archives of the Institute in Rome.

In this way, the Founder, whose unfailing rule was obedience, in his moments of doubt sought from the greatest servants of God an indication of God's will for him. Once this had been pointed out to him, he remained immovable. His principle was to listen only to voices which he had consulted in a spirit of faith and which he had come to recognize as the indicators of God's good pleasure. What added to his difficulty on this occasion was that he had to go against the wishes of his superior, both as parish priest and as his spiritual director, the man who was the protector of his work. This apparent lack of submission was, of course, described as hardheadedness and stubbornness. The servant of God was treated as a person who thought he was always right and would never give in, one who had to have his own way, regardless. He was told as much to his face, amid bitter reproaches. Fortunately for him, he had the wisest persons he could consult on his side. Of course, when Baudran became his adversary, he could really no longer demand that De La Salle should conform to his every wish, nor could he expect his opinions to prevail with a man who did not feel that the point at issue really belonged to the sphere of confession or spiritual direction.

We should also observe that the form of the Brothers' garb had been settled for a number of years already. If people did not fully approve of it as yet, they had at least begun to get used to it. Changing it now would only have given rise to more talk. Furthermore, it was not appropriate to come back on this matter and to start discussing the habit all over again, since this could have gone on indefinitely, and all the parish priests who already had schools taught by the Brothers or who would have opened them later might have put forward their own proposals concerning the Brothers' habit and rule. In short, in all the opposition that the two great men we have mentioned caused De La Salle, the servant of God acted only in accordance with the advice given him by the wisest counselors he could find. With De La Barmondière, he did nothing save on the advice of Baudran. With Baudran, he acted only on the recommendations of Tronson. Without this guidance, he had not taken a step and had done nothing of himself. This is what the virtuous Superior of the Brothers himself declares in the autographed memorandum he has left us on the subject.

While he was thus being crucified exteriorly, he also had to endure more frustration, this time on the part of the two Brothers whom he had brought with him from Reims and whom he had specially chosen to be his collaborators in founding the establishment in the capital. It seemed that he could not have picked two better helpers, for both these young men had received from God great aptitudes for

their mission. At first, De La Salle had no reason to regret the preference he had given these two for this undertaking, for they labored with zeal and shared all his toil. They witnessed his patience, his humility, his silence and moderation amidst calumny and contradiction, and at first they seemed to imitate him. They were associated with him in his sufferings and pains, and they shared the chalice with him. But how great is human frailty! These two disciples, apparently so deeply attached to him, so like their father and so worthy of him, began after two years to rebel against his austere ways and became his persecutors within the Community.

The wicked spirit, who knows all the defects of the human heart, could discern in these men a great deal of secret ambition and of that hidden pride which seeks the first place and feels it is being treated unjustly when that place is given to another. As jealousy is the usual cause that gives rise to presumption and unmasks it, Satan decided to attack these two Brothers by this means. What was the servant of God's surprise on seeing his two closest collaborators creating difficulties for him and instigating discord in the house when he placed a third man over them. As we mentioned before, the good order that reigned in the schools had increased the number of students. Two Brothers could not cope with the task, so De La Salle had sent for two more from Reims to share the labor and help the pioneers gather in the harvest. One of them, as talented for teaching as the first two, was superior to them in piety, and so he was chosen by the pious Founder to assume the leadership of the group.

The pride smoldering in the hearts of the first two Brothers flared up on this occasion. Their self-love was deeply wounded when they saw themselves placed in a position subordinate to this latecomer in a school where they had already labored with so much success and shared their father's humiliations and sufferings. Jealousy, which is always aroused by any preference shown to others and which considers their merits as a personal affront, embittered them against their Superior and led them to revolt. The first of the two, after having sorely tried his father's virtue, left the house, wounding De La Salle's heart cruelly. De La Salle, who loved this wayward son deeply, wept over his departure, as the father in the Gospel wept over the prodigal.

This Brother had great abilities. He would have been irreproachable if to his remarkable qualities of body and mind, and also to the gifts of grace and virtue, he had been able to join humility. His loss was a severe blow to the recently established Community. Obviously, when a flock is very small, the loss even of a single sheep is hard for the shepherd to bear, especially when the one he loses is of such high

quality. So the virtuous Founder was extremely distressed over the disturbance this event caused and over the departure of this Brother. In addition to the scandal he gave to the other Brothers, his leaving could not have occurred at a less opportune time for the new establishment in Paris. No other teacher was so useful for this school, which was beginning to enjoy a good reputation. Tall, well-proportioned, and a skilled penman, he achieved excellent results with the boys, was zealous for their instruction, and was pious and irreproachable in his conduct. He would be remembered today among the most outstanding Brothers if he had been able to overcome his pride.

The second defector would have been entirely like the first if his pride had not led him even further. Although he did not leave the Society just then, he made his patient Superior pay a high price for the two or three years he still remained. It would seem that the only reason he did stay was to be a source of torment and that the devil kept him in the Community only to put the pious Founder's virtue to the test. This arrogant and hot-tempered individual, after having caused his father a thousand kinds of trouble, carried his insolence and disrespect to the point of raising a violent and sacrilegious hand against him to strike him. The devil, as I have said, to whom he had yielded the control of his soul, did not let him leave the Community until he had first sullied his conscience with this crime. Once it had been consummated, he incited him to withdraw, in 1691. What great services this unfortunate man could have continued to render to the Christian Schools, for which God had given him such talent, if he had not allowed the spirit of pride to enter his soul! But what good are natural gifts and talents? They can only lead to the loss of the soul which is not humble.

The departure of the first Brother, which happened rather unexpectedly, left a vacancy on the staff of the Paris schools which had to be filled without delay. Apparently, Reims could not provide a teacher of equal ability at this time, or else the transfer would have occasioned too much disturbance in the schools of Laon, Guise, and Rethel if it had been necessary to choose someone among the Brothers teaching there to send to Paris. So for several months, the deserter's place would have remained empty if De La Salle himself had not stepped into the breach. He replaced the Brothers everywhere he happened to be and was delighted to show them how much he esteemed and honored their work, since he considered it a pleasure, an honor, and a duty to fill this role when occasion offered.

# Chapter IX

*De La Salle falls mortally ill but recovers; he goes to Reims and finds on his return that Brother L'Heureux has died; the impression this event made on him and the regulations this inspires him to adopt for his Community.*

De La Salle's virtue, purified by so many different crosses, was put to a fresh test toward the end of 1690. He fell ill and almost died. This furnished him a new occasion for exhibiting his heroic virtue. The illness began from sheer exhaustion on his part. By not taking better care of himself, he made it worse, so that there was fear for his very life. This general weakness with which the malady started was caused by the extreme harshness he displayed in regard to his body. As we recall everything said above about his vigils and fasts, the fatiguing trips he took on foot, his stern and frequent use of the discipline, the poor and unappetizing food he ate after forcing himself to get used to it, his habit of sleeping completely clothed and stretched out on a board or on the bare ground, his almost constant use of hair shirts, chains, and pointed iron barbs—in short, his constant effort to mortify his senses, we will be surprised only that the servant of God did not succumb sooner to the load of so much austerity and that illness should have so long spared a frame ruined to this extent by penance. But sickness finally overtook him and threw the Brothers into alarm because it seemed to threaten his life.

This new Job owed his children an example of virtue in illness which he had not yet given them. The devil may have imagined that De La Salle did not deserve a place among the perfect, since he had not yet endured the trials of ill health. In fact, this wicked spirit whose malice is consummate, who knows the human heart so perfectly and the weak points at which it can be attacked most successfully, knew that of all the various kinds of struggle, the one from which a man who is too tender toward his body finds it most difficult to emerge victorious is the trial of sickness. This test prostrates even the most vigorous souls. Man is attached to his body more than to anything else, for it is part of his very nature. It does not take such a very exalted degree of virtue for a man to remain indifferent when he sees himself despoiled of his wealth or even when he loses his children and everything else that he possesses outside of himself. Job, that perfect man whom God himself praised, did not deserve these expressions of esteem, according to Satan, until he had undergone the test

of ill health. Perfect as Job was, the malicious spirit expected that his heart, which was proof against all other temptations, would succumb to this one.

It must be admitted that a mortal illness could not have befallen the pious Founder at a more critical time for his work, for it constituted a real crisis for his Community. If he had died, it would most likely have perished with him. The servant of God had finally opened in Paris the establishment that Père Barré had so greatly wanted him to start. In the process of founding it, De La Salle had already undergone all kinds of unusual difficulties. The foundation was flourishing in the midst of thorns; it prospered amidst crosses and held out great promise for the future. But the success of this work seemed, according to the ordinary ways of Providence, to be conditioned by his life. If he died, it would fail. This was the double sacrifice which God seemed to ask of him, and it was so that he could offer God this double holocaust with all possible merit that God brought the Founder to death's door.

## He falls ill during a journey on foot from Paris to Reims

A man who paid more attention to his health than De La Salle did might have foreseen this illness and avoided it, for the exhaustion he suffered should have warned him that his constitution was weakening and that he could no longer bear the overwhelming burden of labors and austerities which he had been carrying for so long. If he had lightened the burden somewhat and provided his body with some rest and decent food, his strength might have been restored, and his health would not have broken down entirely. We know that saints never feel any pity for their body. They are never severe enough toward it, in their opinion, and far from regretting having treated it with too much rigor, they accuse themselves rather of showing it too much consideration and of listening to its complaints too readily. If this pious harshness is indeed a fault, we must admit that the hero of our history is as guilty of it as anyone ever was and that he cannot be blameless. Instead of heeding the muted lamentations of a body which complained of its weakness and of its failing strength, De La Salle, in addition to his usual austerities, undertook a journey on foot from Paris to Reims, where business connected with the Institute called him.

The physical collapse that overtook De La Salle there did not take long to declare itself. He had no doubt felt some premonitions of it during the trip, but his courage disregarded them until he arrived. After taking care of the business at hand as quickly as possible, he

planned on returning to Paris immediately. He wished to disregard his malady, but it was too serious. He could no longer dissemble; he was forced to yield to the violence of the attack and take to his bed. This decision by a man who never listened to his aches and pains gave everyone to understand that the illness must be really serious and made everyone fearful of its progress. What fright seized upon his little flock on seeing its shepherd laid low! What alarm overwhelmed his children when they beheld their father, who was so necessary to his family, obliged to remain in bed! This portended nothing good, as we can well imagine. The tears of joy that his return had drawn from their eyes were now changed into tears of sorrow, and they began to regret the joy his presence in Reims had afforded them. They would have preferred to know that he was still in Paris but in good health.

In the midst of their consternation, the example of his courage, peace, and serenity reassured the Brothers. They thought they could read on his countenance that this illness was not going to be fatal, that they should take hold of themselves, and that the best remedy they could offer him was continual prayer that his health be restored. Each resolved to do violence to heaven and to beg God to give back to them the master who was so necessary, the father whom they loved so dearly. At the same time, they neglected none of the other remedies for him. These were simple enough, for all he really needed was to afford his exhausted body some genuine rest and decent food. The difficulty was to find such food in a house where everything was lacking. True, he still had at Reims a family that was wealthy, quite capable of furnishing him with the necessary relief, but he had forgotten them, and they him. His relatives had washed their hands of him ever since he had gone to share the lives of the poor schoolmasters and especially since he had given away his patrimony to the poor and resigned his canonry to a stranger rather than to his own brother.

In addition, since he had begun wearing the Brothers' habit, he was a source of embarrassment to his relatives, just as they were to him; no help could be expected from them. His only resource was Divine Providence, which never failed him. His children provided for his needs with every possible care and tenderness, and the divine goodness gave them all the help that their father needed to restore his health. Nevertheless, a man who considered himself a stranger in his native city grew weary of so much attention and longed to get away from it. All the relief lavished on his body seemed to offend his fervor. This tender care seemed burdensome to him, and if he could not help making use of it, he did so with a sobriety which mortified his senses and in such a way that his flesh could not feel very satisfied.

## He refuses to allow his grandmother to visit him in bed

This first bout of illness was marked by an outstanding example of regularity given by the servant of God. His grandmother, who was still living, had always loved him tenderly. This good woman was alarmed on hearing of his failing health, so she hastened to the Brothers' house and was on her way to his room to visit him. She did not imagine that her sex would create any difficulty or hinder her from visiting her grandson, and she felt that her title of grandmother gave her a right which might properly be refused to other women. In addition, the Community of the Brothers was not yet a recognized religious community; it had no special privileges nor any canonical status which would have absolutely excluded all women. Even if it was proper to exclude others from the sickroom, it did not seem right to extend this prohibition to a grandmother. Nevertheless, by an order from her grandson, she was stopped at the door of the parlor and advised to wait for him there. The sick man, making a considerable effort to overcome his weakness, gathered together the little strength he had left, got up from bed, dressed, and came down to receive her.

The worthy lady was much surprised at this and seemed offended that she had not found a welcome from her grandson warmer than any other woman would have received. She found it hard to accept a refusal which seemed to disregard her maternal quality. So De La Salle had to listen to some reproaches from her at first. "What objection can there be," she asked, "for a mother to enter her child's room? Doesn't nature itself give her this right? What evil consequences could possibly flow from such a visit? Are you not failing to return my affection when I have come here only to show you my tender concern? Must I attribute your conduct to indifference or to lack of feeling? You call it an example of regularity, but is not your conduct itself irregular? At least ought it not to be considered a mere scruple?"

To justify his conduct, the servant of God appealed to the rule he had made forbidding women to enter the house and to the obligation he felt he was under of upholding this rule by his own example. "There is indeed no objection to your coming to see me when I am sick," he told her, "but I can give an outstanding example by not permitting this liberty between us. In the future, no Brother can ever have anything to say if the door of his room is barred to women, even to his near relatives, when he remembers that my own grandmother did not have the privilege of visiting me when I was sick, save in the parlor." De La Salle then tried to make light of his illness and conversed with his grandmother as he would have done had he been well.

## He returns to Paris and falls ill again

No sooner did he think himself somewhat better than he decided to leave for Paris. A longer sojourn in a city which no longer treated him with scorn had no interest for him. The desire to leave his native city, where his family resided, and his impatience to take up once again his regular lifestyle and to give free rein to his penchant for austerity urged him to leave Reims. So he did, setting out for Paris against the advice of his doctors. He would meet in that city a new bout of sickness. He arrived there so exhausted and so ill that he had to go to bed as soon as he reached the house. The malady grew worse, even though he kept to his bed, and after some six weeks, he suffered a retention of urine which brought him to death's door.

This new spell of ill health induced in the community at Paris the same reaction that the previous one had provoked in Reims: consternation among the Brothers. They were all frightened of losing their dear Superior, the soul and support of their Institute. But accustomed to expect consolation and help from Divine Providence alone, they turned to God in constant prayer and agreed to carry on gentle but holy violence toward their merciful Father, so as to oblige him to give back to them the one who took his place in their regard on earth and who, as such, was their sole support.

What power this pure, ardent, and unanimous prayer has on God's heart! Rarely does it present itself before the throne of the Divine Majesty without being heard. The prayer of the Brothers, so much like that of the early Church for Saint Peter, constantly implored divine mercy to give back to their bereaved family its leader and guide. It was powerful enough to obtain this grace.

Monsieur Helvétius, a Dutch doctor who was quite famous in Paris at this time, proposed a remedy, but he warned that it would involve either the cure or the death of the patient. Consequently, he told the Brothers to have the patient receive Holy Viaticum before the remedy was applied, to draw down God's blessing on the operation and to safeguard the sick man against all the risks involved. Monsieur Baudran, the pastor of Saint Sulpice, came with much pomp and solemnity in a procession made up of several priests from the community and Seminary of Saint Sulpice, all wearing their surplices and with candles in their hands.

A large number of persons of all social ranks accompanied the Blessed Sacrament, either to honor the pious patient or to have an opportunity of seeing a saint on his deathbed. The doctor himself also wished to be present, in order to share in the general edification.

Around the patient's bed, the Brothers wept like children about to lose their father and showed by their sobs and cries what a deep wound the loss of so beloved and necessary a person would make in their hearts. So great was their distress that the parish priest thought that charity made it a duty for him to comfort them in the presence of their pious Founder and to comfort him as well by promising that he would be a father to them. As this great man was naturally eloquent and spoke impromptu with grace and ease, he used all his talent in giving courage by his words filled with tenderness to the hearts of the poor Brothers, who were bewailing their lot and already considered themselves orphans.

The only legacy that these poor children could expect from a father poorer than they was his blessing and a few words of edification. The humility of De La Salle was forced to grant them this favor, under orders from Baudran, his parish priest and spiritual director. The sick man was so weak that he could only pronounce these words that his heart had so often inspired him to utter, but he pronounced them with all the love and tenderness of a father: *I recommend to you perfect union and perfect obedience*. He would not have been able to give them his blessing, if a charitable hand had not upheld his. Having thus made his testament, the only one he could make, and seated on his bed wearing the stole and surplice, he received his Creator with that same attitude of faith, reverence, and devotion which he never lost.

The great Physician of souls gave his blessing to the corporeal remedies which were so hazardous that they could have led either to health or to death. Helvétius, who took a deep interest in his patient, did not leave his side. He remained with him after the departure of the parish priest, anxiously waiting to see if the remedy would take effect, and he wavered between hope and fear for a considerable time. But finally he was reassured when he saw with joy, in the free flow of urine, the good effect of his remedy. Within a few days, the recovering patient was able to take some food, and he quickly regained his health. As soon as the humble invalid felt a little strength returning, he used it to give a new proof of his humility. This virtue, which dislikes imposing burdens on anyone, made him endure with impatience the anxiety and the extra care his illness had occasioned for the Brothers.

A public hospital was the place where his heart longed to be and where he asked to be sent. This last refuge of human misery was the lodging for which he envied other poor people. The spirit of poverty made him desire to go there; the spirit of humility made it a duty for

him, and the spirit of charity made him eager to go. The Founder begged his disciples to have him brought to the charity ward and thus be rid of him. Excusing himself for the trouble he was causing them, he urged them to unburden themselves of it and of him and begged them as a favor to find a place for him in the asylum open to all the poor. That, of course, was the very reason why the Brothers could not bring themselves to agree to what he wanted. Never would they have entrusted to the hands of strangers the care of an invalid so dear to them. They looked after him as sedulously as good children can do for a dear father, and they provided for all his needs, insofar as their extreme poverty permitted.

During these two spells of illness—or rather this one protracted malady—De La Salle showed no anxiety over the future of his Institute, which his death threatened with imminent ruin, no desire to live, no alarm over what would happen to his beloved children. All he sought to do was to keep himself united with Jesus Christ, to share his sufferings in peace, to maintain his heart detached and in total indifference as regards living or dying, to abandon himself to God's hands, to resign himself completely to his holy will, to offer himself as a sacrifice to his greatness and majesty, and to assume the dispositions of a willing victim awaiting with tranquil submission the divine hand which was to immolate him.

The pious Founder, having been delivered most unexpectedly from the dangers and agonies of a death which had come so close to him, thought only of consecrating to the glory of God and to the progress of his Institute, with renewed zeal and redoubled fervor, the life that God had given back to him. Once he recovered from his illness, the first thing he did was to forget all about it. He had just found out by experience that his body was not made of steel and needed proper care, even more than most, but this experience did not make him much more indulgent toward himself than formerly. As always, he was the only one on whom he took no pity and whom he continued to mistreat.

## The death of Brother L'Heureux and its consequences

A second journey to Reims, where his presence was needed, furnished him with the occasion of offering God a new sacrifice, perhaps the most painful of his whole life. We know how attached earthly fathers are to their children and how much they suffer on losing those who hold first place in their hearts. Spiritual fathers suffer no less when God takes away from them those among their children whose

virtue makes them doubly dear and on whom they had founded high hopes. De La Salle had just offered God the sacrifice of his own life. God had been satisfied with the dispositions of his heart and in his goodness had given him back to his fledgling Institute which had no other visible support.

In his place, however, God wanted another victim, a choice one, the best that the little flock could provide. This victim was Brother L'Heureux, of whom we have already spoken at length. Among the Founder's children, no one else was more worthy to replace him in God's sight. By designating him as his successor, De La Salle had preferred him to all the rest; the Brothers had ratified this choice by electing him to be their Superior in the place of their father. He thus occupied in the hearts of all the first place. He seemed to be the Founder's right arm; he was considered the only one capable of replacing him in his absence and of making him live again after his death. For this reason, he was the victim most agreeable to God and the one whose death would cost De La Salle the most.

God chose him and took him away by a premature death at a time and in circumstances which added to the pangs that wrenched the heart of De La Salle, a new Abraham, who so loved this new Isaac and counted on him to insure his spiritual posterity. As we mentioned previously, the servant of God had called this Brother to Paris to have him ordained. When he left for Reims, the Founder appointed him Director of the house. He expected to find him there on his return and to present him in person for ordination. Such was the plan the pious Founder had in mind, but in God's designs, Brother L'Heureux was to die a simple Brother and to disrupt by his death the projects of De La Salle.

No sooner had De La Salle reached Reims than a letter arrived informing him that the Brother had fallen ill. Another told him that the case was serious; a third declared that the doctors had given up hope. The unperturbed Superior, who had left his Isaac in perfect health, did not pay too much attention to these missives that apprised him of this illness. He did not think it could be too serious or that there was any real danger. He felt that the Brothers in Paris were needlessly alarmed and should not have tried to make him share their panic. He still did not believe there was anything amiss until a final letter arrived telling him that the sick man was dying and accusing him of disregarding the previous communications.

At this, the good father, as though awakening from a deep sleep, reproached himself for his incredulity, realized the danger in which his spiritual son lay, and understood with a pang that he indeed might

lose him. Although the sickness had not seemed too serious at the beginning, it quickly turned into a fatal malady with no time to forestall its course. He set out at once for Paris and made as much haste as possible. Apparently, the illness had started with a slight fever which suddenly rose and brought on delirium. Death intervened so rapidly that the dying man barely had time to receive the last sacraments. Brother L'Heureux had been buried for two days when De La Salle reached Paris around midnight.

This was the first thing he learned when he entered the house. The news broke his heart. Never in his whole life did it receive a deeper wound. The first onslaught of sorrow made him shed tears, but getting control of himself, he appeared to be ashamed of this weakness and reproached himself for it. This first movement of human grief was followed by a deeply religious reaction and resignation to God's holy will. He adored the eternal designs and declared on the spot that the sudden demise of Brother L'Heureux was a warning from heaven indicating that the Institute should not include priests among its members. Ever since this event, the Founder remained more firmly convinced than ever that his Community should be based entirely on simplicity and humility and that it would be destroyed if the priesthood ever were introduced into it.

By distinguishing some members from the others, the priesthood would produce inequality among the Brothers and cause division. Their exalted rank would oblige them to apply themselves to higher studies and would give them more knowledge of doctrine than the role of a schoolteacher requires. With this more advanced learning than the rest of the Brothers, they would succumb to vanity, curiosity, singularity, controversy, attachment to their studies, dispensations from the Rule, ambition, and the desire to exercise the more brilliant functions of the sacred ministry. All these defects would not take long to breed others: distaste for the mission of the teaching Brother in a Gratuitous School, boredom in this laborious and tiresome occupation, and finally envy and jealousy. In a word, the Brothers chosen and given preference to enter the sanctuary and ascend the altar would not be slow to put themselves above the others, to dominate them, to become disillusioned with their vocation, and to lose its spirit and the grace of their state, and they would lead others astray as well.

Would such priests be humble enough to confine themselves to the limitations of a vocation which has nothing flamboyant about it in the world's eyes, nothing to flatter self-love? Would they restrict themselves to the role of the schoolmaster and to the useful and necessary function of teaching catechism simply without trying to display their

talents? Those who thought they possessed special abilities would be tempted to exhibit these to the world, to leave the classroom, and to start preaching from the pulpits to win worldly acclaim. The flattering desire to join the reputation of a spiritual director to that of a popular preacher would make them want to be confessors as well as preachers. And would the preacher, the director, be willing to leave the pulpit and the confessional to come back to the classroom? Would a large crowd of hearers belonging to the best society or a following of distinguished and devout women not make these priest-Brothers devote themselves to these eye-catching functions? Would they not be tempted to prefer those sermons which build reputations and the other glorious functions of the priesthood to the instruction of poor and unprepossessing children?

It must be admitted, therefore, that the priestly state is not compatible with that of a teaching Brother and that De La Salle was rightly inspired when he forbade his followers to aspire to the sanctuary. Nothing could be wiser; hence, nothing can be more necessary than the rule he made that closes this door to them. There is perhaps no other which affects the Brothers' state more directly and which is more important for them to observe if they wish to preserve the spirit and grace of their vocation. The death of Brother L'Heureux, which was the occasion for this rule, seems—if we consider all the circumstances—to have been a sign of the divine will on this point. All the Brothers should keep this in mind and let this remembrance help them put aside all temptations to study for the priesthood, if the thought ever came to them.

De La Salle felt that this point was so important that he took the precaution of forbidding the Brothers to learn Latin and of enjoining on those who knew Latin not to make use of it under any pretext, so as to put everybody on the same footing and to maintain them all in the spirit of simplicity and humility which should characterize them. This rule is the guardian of the others, the strong outer wall which defends the fortress.

Experience has shown, in fact, that the Brothers who know Latin or who have some acquaintance with philosophy and theology are not, as a rule, those who succeed best in the Institute and that several of them failed to persevere because they never acquired the spirit of simplicity and humility that their vocation calls for. Instead, allowing themselves to be led astray by vain dreams, they wanted to play the role of professors rather than learn how to carry out the ordinary duties of their state well, something which is not as easy as we might imagine.

There have been, however, several Brothers who put aside what they had learned in their higher studies and attached themselves only to knowing Jesus Christ and him crucified, to imitating his hidden and obscure life, to making themselves humble and obedient like him. Such men, who had truly acquired the spirit of their state, preserved simplicity and humility and carried out their task as teachers with great blessings from heaven. Brother L'Heureux was one of these. After finishing his seminary studies, he still seemed the same as before: simple, humble, regular, mortified, obedient—indeed, a model of all these virtues. After his death, Monsieur Baudran gave him a solemn funeral, the details of which he arranged himself. The parish priest of Saint Sulpice wished by this token of generosity to draw attention to these men whom the world took pleasure in vilifying and making fun of and to provide a striking proof of the esteem he felt for the new Institute.

## Characteristic virtue of Brother L'Heureux

This virtuous Brother whose death was so deeply regretted by his Superior had deserved a special place in his heart and the universal esteem of all his Brothers, who respected and loved him as a living and breathing copy of De La Salle. In those early days of joyous ardor in the Institute, this Brother was the leader of the most fervent. He distinguished himself by the practice of the purest virtues. Humility was the one he cultivated the most and of which he gave the most outstanding examples. As he had been one of De La Salle's earliest recruits, he was also one of those who shared from the beginning the insults and humiliations that befell him. He had plenty of occasions to drink deep with De La Salle from the chalice of opprobrium with which the entire population of Reims rewarded the efforts of these new apostolic workers during the first eight or ten years that they labored in that city.

Brother L'Heureux, far from growing disenchanted with such a humiliating vocation, succeeded in drawing from it all the profit which it provided for his soul. He had learned at the feet of Jesus crucified that scorn and insults were precious graces like those bestowed on the greatest saints. So he applied himself to welcome them with eagerness, following the example of De La Salle. This worthy son of such a father had become so much like him that the Brothers thought they beheld the one in the other when the humility of De La Salle forced them to choose Brother L'Heureux to replace him as the Superior. This son occupying the place of his father, this simple Brother

raised above the priest, never forgot who he was nor who the humble former Superior was whom he saw at his feet. Obliged to command the one whom he should have served and whom he wanted to obey, he tried to do so in the spirit and with the humility displayed by Saint Joseph when he saw Jesus and Mary conforming to his orders.

Embarrassed at seeing De La Salle so dependent on him, he humbled himself and was overwhelmed by confusion, the more the holy priest submitted to his direction. In addition to his rare humility which won all hearts, Brother L'Heureux displayed other excellent gifts. He possessed an agile and penetrating mind and a talent for speaking well. To this he joined great mortification of all his senses, a deep attraction for prayer, and a thirst for obedience, the fruit of his profound humility. These last two virtues showed themselves very obviously when the vicars-general came to the community to depose him and to put De La Salle back in his rightful place. No moment had ever seemed so sweet to this humble Brother as that in which he saw his beloved father restored to his position as Superior. He eagerly profited by his return to the ranks, which he had so much desired, and he took up again his former practices of humility and obedience so readily that he seemed to wish to rival the examples De La Salle had just given to them all.

These two virtues proved useful to him in the study of Latin, philosophy, and theology which he then undertook on the orders of his Superior. They merited for him such brilliant and profound insights that he won sincere admiration at the theology school of the Canons Regular of Saint Denis at Reims. When questioned or when someone challenged him, he seemed hesitant and thoughtful at first; the words came out of his mouth with difficulty. He delayed replying, which occasionally provoked impatience on the part of his fellow students, who laughed at him and sometimes called him a big ox. But once he began to speak, he did so with such ease and his replies were so penetrating that the others were obliged to consider as an eagle the one they had mocked as a big ox.

In all this, he followed the principle he had been taught by De La Salle, which was not to answer hastily but to think out his replies before letting them reach his lips and not to let them strike the ears of hearers until he had offered them to God in his heart. It was his faithfulness to this practice which made him so slow to speak and afterward obtained for him from God the ability to speak with elegance and ease. Besides, his love for study never dried up his spirit of interior prayer and mortification. Knowledge did not puff up his heart. He made use of it only to keep himself smaller and smaller in his own

eyes, more submissive to his Superior's orders, more humble with regard to his Brothers.

The time he had to devote to study did not at all affect his punctuality at the community exercises. His regularity on this point could not have been more exemplary. Those seeing him among the first at community exercises might have thought that he had nothing else to do but to be present at the first sound of the bell. But as knowledge is not acquired by intuition and since only assiduous effort can gain it for us, he borrowed from his night's repose the time he would not take away from the exercises of piety. The loss of such a remarkable subject deserved all the regret that the holy Founder felt over it. It was indeed a great loss which could only be felt very keenly by him whose main concern was the progress of the work whose success seemed to require a long life for Brother L'Heureux.

## CHAPTER X

*Steps taken by De La Salle to prevent his Institute from crumbling and to organize it better; he makes a vow with two of the Brothers never to give up the work; he resolves to establish a novitiate; the opposition he encounters to this project, which he overcomes by prayer and penance; the fervor that reigned in this house of training.*

We have seen previously all that De La Salle did and suffered at the beginning of his work. For almost fifteen years, he had been laboring at this thorny task, this garden watered with his sweat and tears and nourished with the blood of his veins through his cruel disciplines and other mortifications. And yet, his undertaking was making only slow progress. Each time he got ready to lay a new stone during the construction of this edifice, he found new obstacles, and while with loving hands he built it up with so much effort, other hands, evil intentioned and actuated by malice, destroyed and tore down what he had built.

When the holy Founder came to Paris, in addition to Brothers in the schools of Laon, Guise, and Rethel, he had left behind in Reims a community composed of three different sections in which there were about fifty persons. Within two or three years, this tripartite community had all but disappeared. The seminary for country schoolmasters,

which he had launched so successfully and which was full of fervor when he left for Paris, lost its main support when it lost him. It fell apart almost at once. True, the young men trained there did a great deal of good, but what they accomplished only made more regrettable the disappearance of such a useful and promising foundation.

The junior novitiate for the Brothers did not meet with any better fate. These boys who were being trained from the age of thirteen or fourteen were the seed that would spring up and yield a hundredfold, a harvest that the Community of Brothers would reap in due course. In a short time, however, this fruitful source of new recruits dried up under the very eyes of their wise Superior. De La Salle had summoned them to Paris so as to have them near him—as we mentioned earlier—to train them himself and to make of them at Paris what they had been at Reims, that is, a well-cultivated and fertile seedbed of future Brothers. But he was obliged by Baudran and by Sadourni, the sacristan of the parish of Saint Sulpice, to send them to the church to serve Mass. Here they met their downfall. They no longer had activities capable of nourishing their piety, and they also found opportunities for distractions which, little by little, caused their religious spirit to grow cold.

Finally, De La Salle had left behind in Reims a community of sixteen Brothers, not counting the two he took with him to Paris. But that same year, 1688, eight of these Brothers left the community, on account of the Brother whom he had appointed Director over them, a harsh and indiscreet man. To make matters worse, during four long years, that is from 1688 to 1692, these empty places were not filled, and only one new recruit joined to replace the deserters. Who can at this point fail to wonder at the incomprehensible designs of God with regard to his servants? At times, he is pleased to bless their labors; at other times, to strike them with sterility. Sometimes he lends a hand in what they are doing, and the work prospers and yields fruit to their hearts' desire. At other times, he withdraws his hand, and then, like Saint Peter, they labor much but accomplish little or nothing.

Such was the disconcerting prospect facing the Founder at the end of 1690. After so many sacrifices, so much labor and trouble, after so many crosses and persecutions, after so much apparent success, he was back where he had been ten years earlier, with only a handful of Brothers. His undertaking had not made much progress, and he could fear that it would eventually die out. No doubt he felt much perplexity, as we can surmise by reason of the vow we shall mention shortly. He saw himself almost alone, abandoned, lacking resources. He had just come back from death's door, and it seemed that the kind

of life he led, which he did not wish to mitigate, would not last too long. Brother L'Heureux, on whom he had relied, was dead, and no one else seemed capable of replacing him. Several of the Brothers still with him were ill or exhausted by their work. The others needed some sort of spiritual renewal, since they had fallen off considerably from their first fervor. All these discouraging prospects gave him ample reason to doubt the future of his Institute, which as yet did not have any definite constitution or a truly solid foundation.

After prolonged thought about the means for consolidating an edifice which threatened to collapse even as he was trying to erect it, he was inspired: 1) to associate with himself two Brothers whom he considered the most apt to sustain the fledgling Community and to bind them with him by an irrevocable bond to pursue the establishment of the Institute; 2) to establish somewhere near Paris a house where the sick and convalescent Brothers could go to recover their health; 3) to gather all his Brothers there during vacation and to have them make a retreat in order to help them recover, along with their first fervor, the spirit and grace of their state; with all of them needing his advice, direction, and attention, he wished to bring them together under his wing, so to speak, as the mother hen does with her chicks, so as to afford them spiritual rejuvenation and bring them back to their early charity; 4) to establish a novitiate for the training of candidates. All this was eventually accomplished as he desired but at the price of what anxiety and opposition, as we shall see.

## De La Salle and two Brothers vow to maintain the Institute

His first concern, in view of the uncertain future, was to make sure that the Institute would possess at least two Brothers capable of maintaining it in case he himself should die. He needed zealous, courageous men unwaveringly attached to their vocation. Even so, he feared that discouraged by the difficulties and obstacles they would encounter, disheartened by the contradiction and opposition they would have to endure, they might lose heart and abandon an enterprise which had as many enemies as there were demons in hell and almost as many as there are people on this earth. Hence he thought it proper to oblige them to this by inspiring them to make, along with him, a vow in the following terms:

"Most Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, prostrate with the most profound respect before your infinite and adorable majesty, we consecrate ourselves entirely to you to procure with all our efforts the establishment of the Society of the Christian Schools in the manner

which will seem to us most agreeable to you and most advantageous to the said Society.

"And for this purpose, I, John Baptist de La Salle, priest; I, Nicolas Wiart [sic], and I, Gabriel Drolin, from now on and forever, until the last surviving one of us or unto the complete establishment of the said Society, make the vow of association and union to bring about and maintain the said establishment, without being able to withdraw from this obligation even if only we three remained in the said Society and if we were obliged to beg for alms and to live on bread alone.

"In view of which, we promise to do, all together and by common accord, everything that we shall think in conscience and regardless of any human consideration to be for the greater good of the said Society.

"Done on this twenty-first day of November, feast of the Presentation of Our Lady, 1691. In testimony of which we have signed."

This group of three men was for the Institute the triple bond or cord spoken of by the Holy Spirit which is not easily broken and which is capable of drawing everything along with it. The three associates felt an equal ardor to bind themselves to each other and to confirm it by a vow of never abandoning the Community, of persevering in it until death, and of sacrificing themselves to uphold it, perpetuate it, make it live on, and finally, down to the last survivor, take charge of all its interests. They were inspired to make this vow, which they pronounced kneeling, one after the other, at a time when it seemed most unlikely that the Institute could, in fact, survive. This frail little bark, which had already undergone so many and such furious tempests, seemed about to founder. Always on the brink of catastrophe, it was preparing a means to escape shipwreck and to reach safety, thanks to the indissoluble union and the unconquerable confidence of its leader and its two principal members.

The commitment of these two Brothers whom De La Salle considered as the pillars of his tottering Institute was the only resource on which he then based his confidence. If death overtook him before he had finished consolidating his work, he was entrusting to the zeal of these two principal followers the care of completing what he had begun. He was not altogether fortunate in his choice, for one of the two later became a new Judas, as we shall relate. Forgetting both the vow he had made and the father whom he was bound to obey, he created a division in the Society and abandoned it.

As for Brother Gabriel Drolin, he remained faithful to his promise, attached to his vocation, and inseparably united with his virtuous

Superior. Nothing in the world was able to withdraw him from his holy state—not isolation, not the offer of benefices, not the furious assaults that the Community underwent during his absence, not the desertion of a great many Brothers, not the civil death of De La Salle. I call "civil death" De La Salle's flight from Paris and his going into hiding in order to escape the fury of his persecutors. This good Brother Gabriel Drolin, the dean of the entire Institute, is now some seventy-two years old. He has returned from Rome, where he had been sent and where he spent twenty-six years in obedience to the orders of De La Salle, and he now resides in Avignon. As he had completed his ecclesiastical studies and been admitted to the tonsure before entering the new Institute, he was capable of receiving a benefice and of fulfilling other clerical functions, but his virtue, although several times put to the test on this point, always emerged victorious. Faithful to the promise he had made to the Most Holy Trinity, Brother Gabriel preferred to remain an obscure servant in the house of the Lord rather than to leave it and take his place among those who enjoyed benefices or occupied more distinguished positions. We shall have occasion farther on to speak about him at greater length.

## De La Salle plans to open a novitiate, but the pastor objects

Once De La Salle had made sure, as far as he could, that his Community would not be entirely orphaned if it pleased God to call him home, his next concern was to try to find, at Issy or at Vaugirard, some lodgings or a house where he could send the Brothers with impaired health, for he perceived that several of them had reached a state of exhaustion which could have had serious consequences. Their frugal nourishment, joined to the work they did in the schools and to their deep interior life, contributed a great deal to this situation. The Brothers needed rest and, in particular, fresh air, because the house they occupied in Paris was small and had no garden. It did not afford enough fresh air to men who spent their days in absorbing spiritual exercises or in classrooms made very stuffy because of overcrowding.

After looking quite a while, he finally found a house on the outskirts of Vaugirard which seemed to be just what he needed. It stood apart, offered plenty of open space and fresh air, and was unpretentious enough—all the qualities he thought desirable. It is this modest residence that the Brothers can consider as the second cradle of their Institute. Here it renewed its strength and recovered its early fervor. Here the novitiate was launched. Here the generous practice of humility, poverty, obedience, mortification, and penance rivaled that

found in the heroic days of other religious orders. No wonder that the devil, who was perturbed by all this, did everything he could to prevent the founding of the novitiate.

De La Salle's first thought, after having sent the ailing Brothers from Paris to Vaugirard, was to gather there all those who had joined the Society in the last three or four years and to try to renew them spiritually by means of a good retreat. Vacation time made this possible without interfering in any way with the work of the schools. He could bring his men together and counter the falling off in their early fervor by a series of spiritual exercises and by his own example. This he did. The first result he aimed at was to make known to these neophytes, in private and in public by his burning exhortations inspired by the Spirit of God, how far they had fallen from their first charity and how much they needed a good novitiate to stir up the heavenly flame which was burning so low in their hearts. Indeed, they had become superficial, relaxed, and tepid. An eight-day or ten-day retreat was not sufficient to cause them to recover the true interior spirit of recollection, interior prayer, mortification, humility, and obedience which they had never perfectly acquired or which they had at least partially lost. All such a retreat could accomplish was to prepare them to reacquire these virtues and to inspire them with a sincere desire of doing so.

As we know, grace—like nature—does not achieve a perfect work except by degrees. As a rule, both of them take a long time to form a person. The stages of life follow one another, and the transitions from childhood to adolescence and from adolescence to youth are necessary before a person becomes perfectly mature. The same rule holds true in the spiritual order. A virtue that we are beginning to acquire demands much time and constant exercise before it becomes perfect. The holy Founder, who wished to lead his disciples to this goal, felt therefore that he could do nothing more useful than to keep them with him as long as possible in order to complete their formation by all the exercises of the interior life. Fortunately, he had at his disposal some of the young men who had studied at the seminary for country schoolmasters in Reims. They agreed to replace the Brothers who remained with him at Vaugirard. Thanks to their cooperation, all the schools in Paris, Reims, Laon, and elsewhere were able to operate normally, and the novitiate was opened on 8 October 1691.

This plan succeeded as well as De La Salle had hoped. By the end of the year, all the Brothers whom he had kept with him to work at reforming their lives seemed to have become other men. The servant of God beheld them such as he had desired to see them: leading

interior, recollected, mortified, and penitent lives and practicing blind obedience and submission. When he sent them away, he told them to write every month to give him an account of their interior dispositions and to receive his advice. He considered this regular account of their consciences as the support of the regularity of the Brothers in the schools; he recommended it earnestly and was very exact in answering their letters. His own letters, filled with piety and unction, helped to keep up the fervor of those who were far from him, and by calling them all back to the novitiate each year during the vacation period, he succeeded in renewing them in the spirit and grace of their state.

Thus, whether absent or present, he kept watch over the Brothers, guided them, directed their consciences, and by obliging them to give him a faithful account of all the details of their behavior, he kept them in perpetual dependence and perfect regularity. In this way, he succeeded in making them remain novices wherever they were, and so they lived in their communities as they had at Vaugirard, to which they returned every year to reinvigorate in themselves the grace of their vocation and which they left full of zeal, eager to carry out their mission and after having sanctified themselves, to sanctify the students entrusted to their care in the schools. The holy Founder, without limiting his activity to all these points, made a visit at least once a year to each of the schools and to the Brothers who taught in them, and he examined the progress being made by Brothers and students alike.

This first effort at establishing a sort of training center made it plain how necessary it was to set up a regular novitiate and to have all the postulants go through it before admitting them to the Society, in order to test their vocation and give them a solid grounding in virtue. The favorable results he had gathered from his recent efforts showed him what an abundant harvest he would reap from such an institution.

The devil himself was terrified at the thought and employed all his wiles to thwart the proposal. It was, in fact, strenuously opposed by the very man who should have furthered it. De La Salle might have gone ahead with what he had begun, keeping quiet about it and not informing Monsieur Baudran. If he had acted thus, he would not have encountered an adversary in his protector. But a man who sought nothing but God's will in everything and abandoned all his projects to the desires of Providence was incapable of devious behavior, artifices, or disguisement. Candor, simplicity, and purity of intention characterized him, and these qualities did not allow him to undertake anything without the advice and approbation of the parish priest of Saint Sulpice, whom he considered as his superior.

De La Salle therefore felt obliged to ask for the pastor's permission to open his novitiate, but he was unable to gain a hearing. As we know, not all virtuous men think alike, and often enough they oppose one another's projects when the will of God is not obvious. I do not know what led Baudran to refuse his consent to De La Salle's wishes. Perhaps he feared that this new venture, in all likelihood, would grow day by day and might involve added expenses as the number of candidates increased and that this would add to his own financial responsibilities. Perhaps he secretly wanted to circumscribe the zeal and labors of the Brothers within the boundaries of his own vast parish, as Le Tellier, the archbishop of Reims, had wished to limit them to his diocese. Perhaps he foresaw that times were getting harder and that he would not be able to show himself as generous as he would wish in providing for the number of postulants who would join the Community. Be this as it may, nobody really knows why Baudran, a man of such genuine zeal and charity, a firm friend of De La Salle and the protector of his work, would not go along with the proposed novitiate. All we know is that he vetoed the project and forbade De La Salle even to think of it.

This order put the servant of God in a very difficult situation. On the one hand, he entertained deep veneration for the pastor of Saint Sulpice. He considered the latter's words as laws which he respected. He knew he was sincerely interested in what was good, a friend of all pious works, and the main supporter of his foundation. He felt sure that Baudran's intentions were of the best and that he possessed deep insight and profound virtue. On the other hand, he also realized that opening a novitiate was absolutely necessary; it was impossible for his work to prosper without it. The desertion of several of his disciples, the relaxation into which others had fallen, the superficiality and lack of interior life exhibited by the more recent arrivals, the irresolution and hesitation that most of them showed regarding their vocation—all stemmed from the same source: the fact that they had not made a true novitiate.

Furthermore, have not all religious institutes established a period of testing for those who seek to join? Has the Church herself not prescribed this for all religious orders? Where and how can the candidates be tested and trained, if not in a novitiate? Without it, how can we judge the genuineness of their call? How can their character and dispositions be gauged? What guarantee can we have of their perseverance, if we have not taken the time to examine them during a sufficiently long period of probation? How else can they be induced to set aside the spirit of the world and to acquire the Spirit of God? How

can they purify their consciences by a good general confession and acquire a strong desire of doing penance and of expiating their sins, of healing the wounds of their souls, and of correcting their evil habits? How can they arm themselves against their natural inclinations or learn how to combat their passions and to mortify the flesh, if no one tries to train them in this spiritual combat? When and where will they learn how to live in recollection, become interior men, love solitude, silence, and interior prayer, submit their judgment and will to the yoke of obedience, lose all taste for the world's pleasures, attach themselves to piety, cultivate virtue, and make their sanctification their primary concern, if not in a good novitiate?

Sending Brothers out to teach without having for a long time trained them to understand themselves, the world, and the devil is like sending workers out to labor in the vineyard without tools, like sending soldiers into battle without weapons to face the foe. What good can a Brother do in the classroom if he is not firmly grounded in virtue? If he has not sanctified himself, how can he labor at the sanctification of others? As the Holy Spirit asks, how can he be good and useful for them if he is not such for himself? What ability to teach lessons in virtue can that man have who does not give the example thereof? Piety is taught by deed rather than by word, and even though children are not too enlightened, they trust their eyes more than their ears in this matter. Men called to be teachers in the Christian Schools should be a light and a fire for those whom they educate—light to instruct, fire to warm, light to point out the beauty of virtue and the hideousness of vice, fire to devour and consume all love for sin and to enkindle the love of God. It was to all those who are called to teach Christian doctrine that Jesus Christ said, *You are the light of the world and the salt of the earth.*

Since the Brothers share this exalted vocation, can they ever be too holy? And how can they become holy if in a good novitiate they do not make the acquisition of perfection their unique study? De La Salle was fully convinced of these truths; hence, he ardently longed to establish a novitiate and felt that the delay in setting up this citadel of his Institute would spell the ruin of his Community. He had just witnessed the marvelous results produced in the Brothers at Vaugirard by a year spent in the exercises of the interior life. He had only too much experience of the evils that the lack of proper formation had produced among his followers. Finally, the Community had lost men who had joined without quite knowing what they had come for or who were not really settled in their vocation, and others whom God was really calling could not see any gate that provided an entry to the

Community. It was, therefore, absolutely necessary to open such a gate by founding a novitiate and to show them where to come, a place to put them to the test, to train them, and to sanctify them.

## De La Salle's fasting, penance, and prayer to win over Baudran

When he saw that he could not prevail upon Baudran, De La Salle had recourse to prayer and fasting, to vigils and renewed penances. For about a year while this opposition lasted, he fasted daily and prayed almost all night in a retired room. He ceased praying only when sleep closed his eyes in spite of himself and robbed him of the use of his senses. Overcome, he slipped to the floor and rested there. Lying on this stone floor resulted in his contracting a serious case of rheumatism which almost deprived him of the use of his limbs. There the Brothers found him, all but frozen, when they came looking for him in the morning. The concern they felt for his health emboldened them to remonstrate with him over the danger of paralysis or something worse to which he was being exposed by thus sleeping in such a spot, and they begged him not to give them any further reason for worry.

He yielded to their pleas, and it was at their insistence that he discontinued this sort of penance. His use of other corporal macerations, such as bloody disciplines, hairshirts, and iron chains, only increased, and he did not diminish these practices until he found no further opposition on the part of the parish priest to the creation of the novitiate. He had plenty of time to pray and do penance, because Baudran did not give in very soon to his wishes. The pastor even sent word to him, by one of the Brothers, to give up these austerities and prayers and to stop trying to contradict the orders of God, because it was not the divine will that there should be a novitiate. But sometime later, Baudran abandoned the struggle and was obliged to yield to the power of the servant of God's prayers. To avoid all the difficulties which might be raised against it, De La Salle took the precaution of securing from Monsieur de Harlay, archbishop of Paris, the permissions necessary to formalize the community in the house he intended to occupy.

Victorious with God's help, De La Salle desired nothing more than to remain in his dear Bethlehem. This is the name deserved by a house where solitude and poverty made it resemble the stable where Jesus was born. In fact, it was as bare and as poor as the Infant Savior's cave. A few benches to sit on, a few straw pallets laid on the floor, were all the furnishings available. Open to the elements, the

house did not shelter its inhabitants from wind, snow, or rain. Windows and doors were out of joint; windowpanes were broken, and the holes in the walls of the house, which had been unoccupied for some time and which nobody thought of repairing, made it a real abode of penance.

Those who lived there slept on wretched straw pallets with a small bolster stuffed with oat straw. These pallets were laid on planks extended between sawhorses; they had no mattresses, no curtains. A single thin blanket and sheets of the coarsest cloth completed the sparse furnishings. Sleeping almost in the open air, in winter the Brothers endured all the rigors of the season. Those who were near the windows were drenched by rain or covered with snow in wintertime. The others froze, too, since they could not warm themselves, because the wind entered from every side. When they awoke, they found that their breath had congealed on the sheets, making them as stiff as boards. They got out of bed as cold as when they had retired.

## Austerity of life in the novitiate

Only De La Salle had the privilege of having some warmth during the night. His bed was no better than that of the others nor placed in a more convenient spot, since it was near a window. The whole house contained only one or two mattresses, which were reserved for the sick. They had given one to the servant of God, but he would not use it. The Brothers were careful to place it on his pallet. He was equally careful to remove it when he got ready to go to bed, and the next morning they could see it lying on the floor by his bed. Thus nobody could conceive of how he kept warm during the night, exposed as he was like the others to the freezing drafts. In order to sound him out, the Brothers who slept in the same room, amazed because he seemed not to mind the cold, decided one day to complain that they could not get warm all night, exposed to drafts as they were, and got up as cold as when they went to bed. De La Salle seemed surprised when they told him this and declared that on going to bed, he felt as cold as the bed itself but that little by little he grew warmer. He added further that he never felt cold during the night.

Changing their underclothing was another painful mortification in this house. Every Saturday evening throughout the winter, each person found on his pallet a clean undershirt which was frozen stiff, for it could not be dried out. The undershirt had to be taken as it was, and during the night, it merely thawed out rather than dried. During the day, it was another source of mortification to have to wear a damp

undershirt and to dry it out by body heat. For more than one person, this penance must have lasted until the following night, since a half-frozen body could not generate enough heat to dry out a damp undershirt in so short a time. This penance continued all through the winter. During the day, they had no fire; during the night, they could not get warm. The only way these penitents could warm themselves up a bit was by using the discipline.

In fact, they used it constantly, and hairshirts were also common. The example of their Superior made them eager to do this. Although he had for so long been torturing his own body, he had not yet succeeded in satisfying his anger and vengeance toward it. His holy compulsion for tormenting it seemed to grow rather than diminish with time. It is certainly remarkable that De La Salle should have been able to hold out for so long against the rigors of such austerity. He never tired of lacerating his flesh and of bloodying the cruel disciplines, armed with pointed rosettes, that he used on himself. One day, while De La Salle was with some others in the garden, a Brother who was sweeping the room where De La Salle slept found one of these instruments of penance. Wrapped in a piece of paper, it was still covered with fresh blood.

With such a model, the Brothers, stung by a noble emulation, made giant strides in the way of penance. Because they wanted to become men of sorrows, they practiced different kinds of mortification to make the body suffer. Only obedience placed limits to their ardor, and what did they not do to win a favorable reply to their pleas? De La Salle needed all his firmness to restrain them, all his patience to endure their importunities in this regard. In truth, this great penitent was not too reluctant to grant them these permissions; he showed himself generous in this matter. After night prayer, the Brothers surrounded him. One asked permission to take the discipline; another wanted to remain in interior prayer until eleven or twelve o'clock; some wanted to sleep on the bare floor, while others wished to practice some other kind of mortification.

Thus in the entire house, there was scarcely a corner that was not reserved for some particular type of penance. Each one chose a spot where he could chastise his body without interference and with full liberty. The blows of the disciplines resounded in every direction, but the ears which heard them were used to this sound and paid no attention. And yet, even apart from all these austerities, the lifestyle followed in this house was in itself a severe form of penance. The entire day was devoted to exercises of piety as constraining as they were laborious; these kept all the dwellers in the place closely applied to

God. They recited very slowly, while standing, the Little Office of the Most Blessed Virgin. At various times, they made a total of three hours of interior prayer, always on their knees. There were two hours of spiritual reading, one in the morning and the other in the afternoon. The rest of the time was taken up by similar exercises of piety or of mortification.

The repasts were what one would expect, given the poverty of the house and the rigorous spirit of penance that reigned in it. Water was all that the Brothers drank. No cooking ever took place there during the seven years the novitiate occupied the building. Every day someone brought in a hamper from the Brothers' residence in the rue Princesse the ration of bread, the soup, and the plain, unappetizing dishes which were all they had to eat. It was quite a concession that they condescended to warm these provisions up a bit before serving them. Who can believe it? The leftovers from the community of the priests of Saint Sulpice and from a couple of other poor religious houses in Paris provided nourishment for De La Salle and his novices; the only thing extra they ever got was tripe and ox feet. As I said before, people accustomed to decent meals could not have endured the sight of such food, so repulsive was it even to behold, or else they would have thought they were practicing great mortification by simply looking at it. Nothing but keen hunger or the habit of self-denial could have enabled anyone to find any satisfaction in such meals.

However, by making them wait a good while every now and then for this food, Divine Providence took care to make it more palatable to those who had to eat it. Since the provisions were brought from a considerable distance, rain, bad weather, muddy roads, and other circumstances sometimes delayed the Brother who was delivering them. It even happened that he was robbed on the way. Thieves would lie in wait for him as he passed, and several times they did him the favor of relieving him of his burden. As they were probably even hungrier than the Brothers—for this happened only during periods of widespread famine—they were overjoyed at thus finding a dinner all prepared. Although the food was not of the highest quality, their hunger proved an excellent sauce and made them pronounce everything delicious.

When the Brother in charge of fetching the provisions for the novices arrived at the house, terrified, and gave the news to De La Salle, the latter replied with a smile, *God be blessed!* Then he gently begged the Brother to go back to Paris to try to find enough food for another meal, which constituted dinner and supper together and which, as we can easily understand, did not seem at all tasteless to

men whose appetites had been sharpened by the keen country air and the day-long activities they had engaged in. The admirable part of it all was that De La Salle and his novices thought they were too well provided for and that most of them deprived themselves of part or all of their meager portions. All of them lived on alms such as the poorest of the poor come begging for at the doors of rich houses. The Brothers in Paris, as I have said, would go and ask for the leftovers from the tables of various communities and out of charity sent these to the novices at Vaugirard.

The custom of making the accusation of faults before dinner and supper led to another which grew out of the first and proved no less mortifying. The ordinary penance given at such times was to take the discipline in some private place. And so, it often happened that while the others were in the refectory, about half of the Brothers were performing this painful exercise. As a rule, there were always some who began the meal with this penitential hors d'œuvre, and the feature which the most mortified ones considered the best part of it all was that they often had time to enjoy this prelude at length. It might happen that the pious Superior, distracted and overlooking the ones who were not present because they were taking the discipline, forgot to send someone to tell those continuing this penance to stop. Thus he gave them ample time to inflict more punishment on themselves, for these humble penitents, who would not have dared to take a discipline in hand except through obedience, awaited word from their Superior to stop using it, and while waiting, they continued to scourge themselves vigorously.

Still, it generally happened, even though a bit late, that some Brother, noticing those who were absent, ventured to remind the Superior of those who were doing penance and had him call them back. Then one mortification was followed by another that completed the first. Because the period allotted to the meal had partially elapsed when the penitents returned to the refectory, they had to leave along with the others after taking only part of their food and so had only half a dinner or supper. As they were never sent back to finish their meal, they had the advantage of joining fasting to the discipline or whatever other kind of mortification they practiced. Those to whom this happened appeared the most satisfied and showed the most elation during recreation. Far from complaining—like those of whom the Prophet speaks—when they were not filled, they rejoiced over their good fortune and were delighted at having been able to punish their bodies at leisure and to leave them fasting, after whipping them like animals that one can goad onward only by beating them and while

regretting the scanty food given them, because they seem undeserving of it.

The fervor that reigned in this novitiate was indeed extraordinary, so much so, that to satisfy the novices, penances were not parsimoniously handed out. The most difficult ones were those which they accepted with the greatest joy. Most of them, to oblige their Superior to treat them with the utmost rigor, exaggerated their faults, and when he did not impose on them penances as severe as they desired, they threw themselves at his feet to implore him to be more stern and to punish them himself for their cowardice and tepidity. Others, following the maxim of Saint Francis de Sales, asked for nothing but accepted with joy mortifications which they had not chosen: eating nothing but a crust of bread, drinking only a swallow of water, remaining on their knees in the middle of the courtyard during almost all the time of dinner or supper or next to a window when curiosity had induced them to glance through it as they passed. These, too, would come back to the refectory only toward the end of the meal, yet they said grace after meals with the others for food which they had left virtually untouched. In a word, in this training school for the virtues, the novices sought to practice all of them; they concentrated all their ambition on running along the narrow and thorny path of perfection.

## Unusual poverty of this novitiate

By the poverty of the house and the meals, we can judge that of their apparel. People who lived only on leftovers given to them in charity and who—if I may apply to them the words of the Gospel—were glad, *like whelps, to lick up the crumbs fallen from the master's table,* were also clad like beggars. The most miserable paupers would not have stooped to pick up anything belonging to the Brothers or to their Superior. To tell the truth, their external appearance was that of paupers. I am convinced that if the stockings, shoes, robes, capotes, and hats worn by the Brothers, along with all the rest of the furnishings of the community, had been dumped out into the street, they might have drawn pitying glances from passersby, but no one would have extended a hand to pick them up.

All their clothes together would have amounted only to a bundle of vermin-infested rags, fit only to be thrown on the refuse heap. If we had inspected these novices, one after the other, from head to foot, we would have felt either horror or commiseration. Not one wore shoes, hat, robe, or other garment that could not have been classified as useless or fit only to be thrown away. Old, worn-out

shoes which hardly held together, faded and torn stockings, robes and capotes patched and mended with various strips of differently colored cloth, and old hats with holes in the brim, all spotted and soiled, made the individual Brothers look like scarecrows. That provoked pity and made the lot of them resemble a troop of wretches whose profession alone distinguished them from tramps, whom nothing but compassion could make respectable to those capable of feeling compassion.

De La Salle, as poor as the rest and resembling them in all things, covered his shabby soutane only by a capote which was no better and which was green with age. He wore a hat with a wide brim which flapped down on his shoulders. When they all sallied forth to go to a nearby chapel where De La Salle said Mass and gave them Communion, they looked like a troop of paupers leaving the poorhouse or men arriving from another planet. They resembled the Gabaonites, who deceived Joshua and made him believe by the worn condition of their clothes and the disarray of their accoutrement that they were strangers arriving from a distant land. These Brothers remind us of those heroic men who, looked upon as the offscouring of this world, served God in hunger, thirst, and nakedness. They were all so pitifully clad that when they had to go to the parish church to make their Easter duty or to attend Mass on the feast of the patron, Saint Lambert, it took them two or three days to get ready and to dress themselves so as to appear in public without offending decency. No matter what pains they took to avoid shocking people who had no use for the holy virtue of poverty, so despised and detested in the world, they still attracted the attention of the least attentive and most indifferent people, drawing down on themselves the scorn of the former and the compassion of the latter. To make matters worse, the lice which generally accompany extreme poverty aroused the indignation and contempt of all and kept people at a distance from them, so that even in church they were shunned and isolated.

Most admirable of all, these men who had become poor by choice considered poverty as a treasure and seemed more satisfied than Solomon in all his glory. Their leader, after exchanging the riches of Egypt for the poverty of Jesus Christ, had succeeded in making them appreciate by his example and his words the hidden manna which he discovered in destitution. The proof of how satisfied their hearts were and of how lovingly Divine Providence watched over the little flock is the fact that not one of them fell sick from such rigorous living and extreme poverty during the seven years that the novitiate remained at Vaugirard. Oh truly fortunate village, sanctified by the

presence first of Olier and then of De La Salle! De La Salle can be called Olier's spiritual son, since he was trained in his seminary and there acquired his spirit. These were two of the holiest persons that Paris possessed during the past century. Fortunate indeed is the village that had the honor of being the cradle both of the famous Seminary of Saint Sulpice, source of so many saintly ecclesiastics, and of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian and Gratuitous Schools.

It seems that Divine Providence, which takes care to oppose the most exalted examples of virtue to the vilest scandals, of heroic sanctity to the outpouring of sin, was pleased to bring all these holy people capable of sanctifying and edifying it to this town which was so badly reputed on account of the disorders and debauchery that occurred there. Indeed, wherever the disciples of De La Salle went, people thought they saw a different race of men having nothing in common with ordinary mortals but the earth they inhabited. Seeing young men in the flower of their age walking silently through the streets of Paris, as recollected as though they had been at the foot of the crucifix, attentive to God's presence, not distracted by the uproar of the tumultuous city, as deaf to the sounds that struck the ears of the other passersby as to the insults offered them, we might have thought that they were dead men risen from the tomb who had come to visit the living without wishing to associate with them. As for me, when I saw De La Salle accompanied by his followers at this time, I thought I beheld Saint Francis with the early friars who went abroad to edify others and who thought they had preached enough when they merely appeared in public.

## Chapter XI

*Continuation of the same topic; the fervor that reigned in the novitiate at Vaugirard.*

The divine fire enkindled in the novitiate of Vaugirard helped to revive the fervor of all the Brothers in the Institute. The generous ones found there a new increase of charity, and those who had let their first ardor cool somewhat returned there to purchase with their blood and at the price of the most painful mortifications that pure gold which is beyond all price and makes its possessor sovereignly rich. I would be only telling the truth if I declared that De La Salle's ingenious zeal for the sanctification of his children found the means to

make all the Brothers become novices once again and to keep them such for the entire period during which the novitiate remained under his direction at Vaugirard or in Paris. How did he do this? Each week, he called all the Brothers teaching in the Paris schools back to the novitiate, and every year during the vacation period, he summoned those employed in the Reims area. He had them all take their places among the novices and follow the novitiate regulations. In this way, the fervor of the Vaugirard novitiate spread to all the Brothers; every Brother was a novice and remained such all his life.

Those from Paris, being the nearest at hand, spent half of their time at Vaugirard. They returned there not only during vacation but on Wednesday and Saturday evenings and on the eves of feasts, and they went back home on Friday and Monday mornings. They slept on straw pallets laid on the floor. During the time they spent in this holy house, nothing distinguished them from the novices. All devoted themselves to the same exercises. The older Brothers could be discerned only by their greater fervor. They served as models for the more recent recruits and incited them to the practice of mortification and penance by furnishing them with more striking examples of these virtues. The inconvenience of coming and going between Paris and Vaugirard so often, in winter and summer, of covering this long distance in mud or snow, in heat or cold, never made them less willing to come to take refuge again underneath their father's wings in this house where mortification reigned. No matter what condition they were in when they arrived, soaked by rain or snow, muddy or sweaty, once they reached the house, they did not grant themselves the satisfaction of resting a while, of cleaning up, of warming themselves, or of drying out their clothes. They immediately proceeded to join the exercise then in progress, as though they had just risen, fresh and rested, from a comfortable bed.

On these occasions, the spirit of mortification was ready to replace the little satisfactions that natural instinct might have desired in a place so lacking in anything of the kind, for if the Brothers had heeded the desires of the flesh, always eager for rest, they would have vainly sought any means of satisfying themselves in a house where everything of this sort was wanting. There was practically no furniture, only what was absolutely necessary for the bare support of life. They could not find there either chairs to sit on, clothes to change into, or even fire for the ordinary necessities of life.

The only time they made any fire at Vaugirard was to warm up the food brought in from Paris. The rest of the time, no matter how severe the weather might be or how cold it got, no fire was ever seen.

The poor Brothers, frozen as they were, had no other means of thawing themselves out other than the warmth of charity or the rays of the sun when the weather warmed up again in summer, or, as I have already mentioned, the use of the discipline.

They could have said with truth that the place they lived in was the house where everything was lacking. To find any contentment there, one had to leave his body at the door on entering. Only men who forgot that they possessed a frail body or who remembered it only to maltreat it could get used to living in a house where nature was crucified while the spirit rejoiced. Consequently, fervor was necessary to sustain human frailty, and for this reason, those who did not possess it could not remain very long, as we shall soon see. But at all events, as Saint Teresa says, *Where there is less nature, there is more grace*. God communicates himself to the soul that scarcely holds to its body any more and, although still joined to it, forgets it and rises above its desires. The abundance of the divine gifts and consolations the soul receives is measured by the courage it shows in renouncing itself. In these academies of virtue, the most mortified people are always the happiest. The Brothers who came from Paris to Vaugirard, often with so much difficulty, weary after their class work, their long walk, and the novitiate exercises, were happy when a laborious day was followed by an uncomfortable night which provided them with another opportunity for mortification on account of the damp beds, where they nearly froze during winter in this house where fire was forbidden.

## Holiness attracts new recruits; many leave, but some remain

These new inhabitants of the building at Vaugirard, whom their Superior kept hidden with him in silence and obscurity and who were never seen outside the house except when they went to church, still could not avoid the eyes of passersby and of people who lived in the village. Their unusual manner of living and their outlandish garb pointed them out sufficiently and made them known soon enough. The extraordinary character of their virtue impressed everyone, and either from curiosity or from a desire of being associated with them, people wanted to see them at close range and to enter into conversation with these men who seemed to have broken with the world entirely. As we know, holiness sooner or later pierces the veils in which it shrouds itself and, in spite of itself, sheds its light abroad. Grace makes use of the attraction it exercises to charm those who are called to live holy lives. The sight of the saints inspires a desire for holiness,

and contact with them is a powerful means of acquiring it. After keeping them hidden within the secret of his face, as Scripture expresses it, God reveals the saints to those whom he wishes to make like unto them, and when he does this, he inspires such persons to be joined to them. This is what happened in the present instance.

When they saw De La Salle at the head of his disciples, people might have thought that they were seeing the famous Trappist abbey transported to the outskirts of the capital or that a colony of those holy penitents had come to edify the great city and teach it that these later times had witnessed a revival of the poverty, humility, penitential spirit, and life of prayer which had characterized the first centuries of the Church. Candidates, moved by God and struck by the saintly life of the Brothers, asked to be admitted the very year after the house was opened. On 1 November 1692, De La Salle gave the habit to five novices and one serving Brother. Later, he had to make a selection among the many who presented themselves. This was not difficult to do and did not take long. Those who proposed to enter into this Community which could rightly be called the Community of Martyrs of poverty and penance could not remain in it without a generous determination to embrace both these virtues.

Those whom curiosity or destitution had led thither were punished once they entered, for the company, the lifestyle, and the example of these crucified men seemed unbearable to them. The penance and mortification practiced there, which nothing but grace based on a solid vocation could make anyone accept willingly, frightened them and quite soon obliged them to ask that the door be opened to let them out of a place which they considered as a prison for culpable criminals, self-condemned to a life sentence of the poorest and most austere existence. If human respect held them back for a few days, this time seemed like months and years to them, and they longed to be delivered from a captivity which tortured their senses, their bodies, and their very souls.

De La Salle, without any prior investigation or selection, admitted all who presented themselves. He felt sure that the kind of life led in the house was like a strong and impetuous wind which, while letting the good grain fall into the granary, would winnow the grain from the straw and the cockle. He was right. Among those who came without a real vocation and an efficacious desire of giving themselves to God, the strongest and most resolute could not make up their minds to stay more than a week or ten days at most. When they finally left, they did not fail to sound the alarm and to broadcast everywhere that one had to be his own murderer in order to live with the Brothers. They also

asserted that if anyone had a secret enemy, he should sing the praises of the Community to the man on whom he wished to take revenge and thereby inspire him with the desire of entering so that he could have the malicious pleasure of seeing the other leave, as he himself had done, after making him expiate the pleasure of satisfying his vain curiosity by a week or so of imprisonment.

The famine which raged in 1693 and 1694 brought in other young men who had nothing to eat and who were looking for some way to survive. These, too, did not remain very long. The rigorous penance repelled those whom hunger had induced to enter, and they preferred to take their chances with starvation outside rather than remain and have food at the expense of their bodies. Others, led by the Spirit of God, were impressed by the good example they found. These soon gave proof of a strong vocation. The happiness that shone on their faces betrayed the fervor that filled them, as did the willingness they showed to lead a crucified life. Thus the house was like that great net in which all sorts of fish, good and bad, were caught, but the heavenly Master did not delay in sorting out the good and rejecting the others. At most, one or two out of a dozen finally remained. Yet this little company of choice souls eventually reached the number of thirty-five who persevered with unconquerable courage in a house which was a center for poverty, penance, humiliation, and mortification.

## Only two of those who remained were really poor

What made God's action appear most obvious was that among this number, only two were really poor lads. The others came from comfortable homes and could have lived at ease by remaining there, but good example and fervor made them enjoy living in a house which offered them nothing but contradiction to nature and rejection by the world. This abundant grace, which made the water spring out of the rock, which transformed the bitter waters of mortification for these true Israelites, was the reward won by the generous sacrifices De La Salle had made of his canonry and his family wealth. *Ever since I gave up everything*, he himself often said, *I have never met a single candidate tempted to leave us on the grounds that our Community was not endowed.* These are the concluding words in his memorandum which we have used up to this point since beginning this second book.

The vocation of these young men must indeed have been very firm to make them persevere in such a crucified state as this. Grace must have been abundantly poured out on all these postulants who

requested their admission to such a poverty-stricken place where even bread was often lacking. We shall soon see, in fact, to what extremities De La Salle and his flock were reduced in 1693 and 1694. During this period of famine, they were spared none of its hardships; it was a miracle of Providence that they managed to escape starvation. No doubt nothing but their extraordinary fervor could have made these young men remain in a house where the general scarcity was more keenly felt than elsewhere, especially since if they had left the Community and gone home, they would have enjoyed everything they needed.

How did De La Salle manage to provide for all those who presented themselves and whom he admitted without hesitation during these tragic times? A Brother who is still living—who witnessed what went on and has related it all to us—recalls that out of every dozen candidates, only two or three remained; hence there must have been three or four hundred who entered, since thirty-five persevered. That they survived at all was indeed a miracle of Providence. Prodigies of this sort are performed by God for those who abandon everything for him and have left everything for Jesus Christ. As everybody was welcome in this humble house and since it was open to all the poor, they came flocking in with confidence. It cost nothing to enter, and if after staying awhile, anyone wanted to leave, he did so as freely as he had entered.

Sometimes the novitiate served as a refuge for people who had nowhere to go or as temporary lodging for others who were looking for something better. Among these were some priests from afar who remained as long as they liked, with the possibility of saying Mass every day, of rising later than the Brothers, and of going out to attend to their business. Except for a half carafe of wine which De La Salle had served to them at each meal, their food was the same as that of the Brothers. Such a poor and penitential house had nothing better to offer. Nevertheless, this free guesthouse, so near Paris, was convenient for those who had business in the city; thus there were usually two or three of them in residence. When De La Salle had to go to Reims, one or the other of these priests celebrated Mass for the Brothers in his stead.

## De La Salle gathers the school Brothers to the novitiate

When vacation time came, the zealous Superior made haste to procure for the Brothers of Reims, Laon, Guise, and Rethel the benefits that the novitiate afforded by calling them all to this blessed house to

be renewed in the spirit and grace of their vocation. Their stay began with a ten-day retreat, but in fact the entire month of September was a long retreat. De La Salle led them in the exercises and inspired them even more by his example than by his words, filled as they were with unction and the Spirit of God. Thus, this good father had the satisfaction of seeing his children come together every year—from thirty, forty, or fifty leagues away—to throw themselves into his arms, eager to learn from him all the lessons he wished to teach them. They vied with one another in listening to his instructions, seeking his advice, submitting to his reproofs, and profiting by his example.

During this month, he sought to do for these Brothers what he had done during the year for the ones who lived in Paris: namely, to show himself a tender father, a vigilant shepherd, an enlightened Superior, a charitable director, a skillful and experienced physician of souls. He enlightened them by his insights, read the depths of their hearts, laid bare the roots of their vices and passions, teaching them how to overcome these, and filled them with the courage and strength needed to win daily victories over themselves. These virtuous Brothers did not receive these graces in vain; like the laborers called late to the master's vineyard, they strove to catch up with those who had begun earlier, and by redoubling their fervor, they tried to make as much progress in virtue during this one month as the others had achieved in the course of the preceding year.

Such noble emulation could produce only excellent results; while stimulating the fervor of both groups, it also increased their humility. The early arrivals, ashamed to see the latecomers so far advanced on the narrow path which leads to life, strove to equal and to surpass them. The latter, confused at seeing themselves outstripped, accused themselves of slackness and tepidity and made strenuous efforts not to be outdone in the race where every step costs so much to nature and where no progress is possible save by doing violence to oneself.

The little house at Vaugirard was so full that only the attic remained available to lodge the Brothers who came from far away, nor was it wealthy enough to provide each of them with a pallet. The only way to accommodate them all was to have them sleep in this attic, after the fashion of domestic animals in barns, on one big heap of straw.

Here is an instance of the fervor characteristic of these Brothers from the provinces. One of them had arrived, like the others, on foot. Although very weary, he did not seek repose, save in the exercises of piety which he followed all the rest of the day. Then, noting the different penances practiced during supper, he reproached himself with

his remissness. Feeling ashamed of himself and filled with the holy anger which he saw everyone in the house giving vent to against the flesh, he could not consent to go to bed without making his body feel the effects thereof. Impatient, unwilling to wait until the next day to carry out his share of penance—which was, as he could see, of daily occurrence in the house—he found it difficult to wait until after night prayer to ask for the permission which he felt ashamed for having delayed so long in asking. Once he had obtained it, he was even more embarrassed, because he had either lost his discipline on the way or had left it behind in the community from which he had come.

In those days, the Brothers, like valiant soldiers who always go about armed, invariably brought this instrument of penance along with them wherever they went. So this Brother, now that the time had come for him to engage his domestic enemy in bloody combat, resembled a warrior without weapons. Unwilling to withdraw from the fray or delay his attack for a moment, he had to appeal to another Brother's charity and borrow his discipline. He wielded it so vigorously that when he returned it, it was stained with his blood. Its owner could feel that it was moist and later saw that his own hand was bloodied. The next day he showed De La Salle the proof of the fervor of the newly arrived Brother. He thought the holy Founder would be impressed, but De La Salle, who was accustomed to such things and whose own instruments of penance were dyed with his blood every day, was surprised at the Brother's astonishment and made him understand this by a smile and a shrug of his shoulders.

The way the Brothers from the schools spent the vacation of 1691 at Vaugirard became the rule followed in subsequent years. As long as the novitiate remained there—a period of seven years—all the Brothers gathered from everywhere by De La Salle's order, and they renewed their fervor by a retreat of ten days plus a month spent following the novitiate exercises. It was here, as we related previously, that a dish of absinthe was served to them. The cook, seeing that the garden was full of this plant and thinking that it was edible and might in a pinch replace some other vegetable, went ahead and served it, a fact which proves both his own ignorance and the poverty of the house. Mortification had reached such lengths that no one would have taken the liberty of removing the flies which fell into the soup or into the portions served. Nothing rebuffed these mortified men after witnessing the examples that their Superior gave on this point, for he ate his soup, even though it was full of flies, without seeming to notice them. When one day he saw one of the Brothers removing the insects from his bowl, he made him a sign not to be so fastidious.

Although life in the house at Vaugirard was most austere, De La Salle found it a real earthly paradise, a place in which he took delight, because there he was able to give free rein to his fervor and to yield himself, without restraint, to the spirit of penance and prayer. Concerned with nothing but his own perfection, he pursued this goal in the constant search for and practice of abnegation and death to self. He taught nothing that he did not first carry out. There was nothing humiliating, nothing austere, and nothing repugnant to nature of which he did not give the others a continual example. The meanest duties, the most toilsome chores, and the most mortifying practices he tried out first before inspiring others to embrace them.

In addition, he was the man who did everything in this little Community, filling the roles of Superior, Director of Novices, Bursar, and Procurator. True, this latter function in a house which lived solely on alms and where there was nothing to defend against thieves or swindlers did not call for a great deal of effort. The task of providing for the needs of the Brothers did not take much from his hours of recollection and prayer, nor even from his hours of rest. It often happened that he did not hear the alarm go off, even though he had it near him, for his humility had also led him to take on the duty of awakening the community, and during several months, he added this responsibility to all the others he fulfilled in the house. He went to bed very late, and his sleep was short, so it is not surprising that he slept heavily and that at times the alarm was not loud enough to awaken him. When this happened, he made public penance for it and condemned himself to remain on his knees during dinner, with only a dry crust of bread to eat, after accusing himself in the refectory of his supposed fault and humbly asking pardon of each Brother, kneeling in the posture of a criminal.

While De La Salle was at Vaugirard, a certain nobleman dwelt in the neighborhood, a man of great virtue who led a very retired life in a sort of solitude near the observatory. This was the Count du Charmel. He used to spend a part of each year at the Trappist monastery, especially during Lent, and devoted the rest of his time to all sorts of good works. His daily schedule included long periods of interior prayer and, although a secular, he exemplified for the world the recollection of those famous religious whose example he went to observe and whose penance he emulated. It might have seemed that a monk from La Trappe had left his solitude and come in the person of this gentleman to the neighborhood of Paris in order to edify the public and to proclaim to men that he belonged to that illustrious monastery. These two great servants of God, each totally preoccupied with

his own life and with pleasing the Lord while remaining forgotten by men, lived close by each other without knowing anything of one another.

One day, three Brothers who were on a journey were brought to the chateau of the Count du Charmel by the local parish priest. This meeting apprised him of the fact that his neighbors in the village on the outskirts of Paris were a community whose lifestyle could be considered a worthy rival of the penitential and mortified existence proper to the monks of La Trappe. He also learned that De La Salle was from the same part of the country as himself: since the chateau of the Count du Charmel, in the diocese of Soissons, was only nine leagues from Reims.

When the three Brothers came through the village, they asked for hospitality at the house of the parish priest. The latter was even more surprised at the modesty shown by these young men, at their piety and decorum, than he was at the unusual dress they wore; he wished to share his astonishment with the local aristocrat. Upon hearing the description the pastor gave of the virtue of his guests, the count was eager to see and to speak with them. He inquired after their manner of living and the purpose of their Institute. Everything he learned impressed him most favorably, and what he observed in these three young Brothers edified him so much that he wished to offer hospitality in the future to all the Brothers who might pass through the village. He even urged them to ask De La Salle on his behalf to choose his chateau as the regular lodging place of the Brothers and to send all those who might be travelling in the vicinity to stay with him.

## The Count du Charmel visits Vaugirard

The sight of these Brothers, whom he welcomed and entertained with so much charity after making interior prayer with them in his chapel, inspired him with a strong desire to know their Superior. On his next trip to Paris, he did not fail to stop to see the man whom God had made use of to establish a work so useful to the Church, and as a pledge of his esteem and affection, he presented him with a richly decorated antependium and matching chasuble. In time, he and the servant of God became fast friends, a relationship which ended only at the count's death. De La Salle himself entertained a singular esteem for this pious nobleman, and to sum up his high regard for him, he used to say that he was a man whose prayer was uninterrupted.

Monsieur Boüin, the celebrated spiritual director whose eminent virtue shed such luster on the Seminary of Saint Sulpice, also came

from time to time to visit the Bethlehem of Vaugirard and to converse with its Superior, but before asking for him, he was always careful to inquire whether he might be at prayer or engaged in some exercise which required his presence. If such was the case, he did not allow anyone to inform De La Salle of his arrival but contented himself with asking after his health. This was an example of the punctuality and the faithfulness in observing little details shown in all things by this great master of the spiritual life. If he was told that De La Salle could easily leave off what he was doing, he would go into the garden and, kneeling, would wait there for his disciple, for it was he whom the pious Founder had chosen as his spiritual director to succeed Monsieur Tronson. As the community of Brothers at Vaugirard was not far from the country house belonging to the Minor Seminary of Saint Sulpice, which is located in the neighborhood, De La Salle himself sometimes went there to consult Boüin, the superior of this establishment, who had replaced Monsieur Bernier, who then resided at Angers.

I am referring here to the vacation of 1695, a blessed period when the seminarians could see one saint coming to consult another, ask for his advice, and conform to it with respect. When De La Salle entered the junior seminary house, he made the presence of God felt there, so deeply did he himself seem penetrated by it. He impressed those who did not know him by the aura of grace and virtue which always seemed to hover over his face. Those who had never seen him before said to each other, "Who is the venerable priest who looks so much like a saint?" Boüin sometimes told them that this was a former canon of Reims, who had given up everything to walk in the footsteps of the Apostles. The father showed much esteem and respect for the virtues of his spiritual son. When some of the young ecclesiastics waxed eloquent on the subject of the poverty, the penance, and the recollection of De La Salle while others praised the humble and mortified life embraced by him and his disciples, Boüin gave them to understand that what he himself admired most was his perfect abandonment to Divine Providence and his unreserved resignation to God's good pleasure. He added—to give them an idea of the degree of perfection which the Founder of the Christian Schools had attained—that De La Salle was prepared to see the ruin of his work with unfaltering gaze and that he had set himself in a state of total indifference and remained completely abandoned to God's holy will regarding this supremely sensitive matter.

Once during the same vacation period, the ecclesiastics of the Minor Seminary of Saint Sulpice and the Brothers saw their two superiors officiate, one after the other celebrating the sacred mysteries.

This was on the feast of Saint Lambert, the patron of the Vaugirard parish. The Blessed Sacrament was exposed. Boüin had brought his community there to attend Mass, and De La Salle had done the same with his group. Never was there a devotional spectacle more striking and more edifying than to see at the altar these two holy priests of the New Law renewing in an unbloody manner the sacrifice of the cross. The mere sight of them inspired the onlookers with faith, respect, recollection, and devotion. They seemed so filled with these sentiments themselves that an observer might have supposed that they saw Jesus Christ in the Most Blessed Sacrament with their own eyes. Both held themselves before him in total annihilation and in that sacred awe which Saint John in the Apocalypse ascribes to the twenty-four ancients and to the four living creatures prostrate before God's throne.

Boüin celebrated holy Mass first and gave Communion to his seminarians, doing this with an extraordinary air of sanctity. He might have been taken to be one of the seven highest spirits who stand closest to God and are consumed with love before his eyes. It did not seem possible that there could be on earth another mortal holier than he was, more filled with God and his holy love. Nevertheless, I dare say that De La Salle, who celebrated Mass after him and gave Communion to his followers in his turn, appeared even superior and more distinguished in the order of grace. In truth, anyone beholding these two saintly priests might have thought he saw two seraphim, but the latter seemed to betray on his countenance a greater elevation before God and a more eminent sharing in his holiness. No one should be surprised at this. The life De La Salle led at Vaugirard was a real martyrdom, a true crucifixion of his flesh, as we have abundantly shown. All his senses were in captivity; scarcely one member of his body remained without its own special torment.

And yet, it pleased God to add to so much voluntary suffering certain physical ailments even harder to bear, and most astonishing, the remedy to which the former canon of Reims had recourse was more painful than the illness itself and constituted a new form of torture.

## De La Salle endures a cruel remedy for his rheumatism

The reader will recall that during a whole year the servant of God had spent most of his nights praying and doing penance and that the repose he did take was on a stone floor. He there contracted a severe case of rheumatism which later on afforded him ample occasion for practicing patience. After suffering violent pain for a considerable

time, he eventually found himself unable to move his arms, his legs, indeed, his whole body. Remarkably enough, the illness grew less severe on Sunday, and the incapacity for celebrating Mass which he had suffered from all week diminished. On Sundays he had himself brought to the chapel, and he dragged himself to the altar as well as he could with the help of the Brothers. They held him upright so he could say Mass. Every step cost him as much suffering as if he were walking barefoot upon a carpet of thorns, but his joy at being able to celebrate Mass made him disregard his pains. Once he stood at the altar, his own fervor and divine grace upheld him, and surmounting his natural weakness, he forgot his pains and remembered only the sacrifice he was offering to God. Then, happy at having immolated the Divine Victim and been nourished with his body, he gladly returned to his bed of suffering.

Still, this malady, although it won great merit for the Founder, would have made him incapable of serving his Community if it had lasted indefinitely, so he sought some remedy for it. I do not know who the doctor was who proposed the therapy which only a saint would have accepted. It was one of those cures which nobody would want to experiment with on his own body and which he would recommend only to an enemy. But De La Salle considered his body his greatest enemy. There is nothing to wonder at if he seized this opportunity to add a new species of torment to so many others which he had inflicted on his flesh. Here is what they did.

They laid him on a sort of wooden grate; underneath him they placed two big iron pots full of hot coals. On these they strewed branches of juniper so that the hot, penetrating smoke might enter the pores of his body, thus provoking a sweat that would draw out the rheumatic humors or consume them while fortifying the nerves and the other parts of the body. In addition, while one side of the patient's naked body lay exposed to the burning heat, he was covered by blankets and quilts to concentrate all the warmth in his members. In this new form of torture, neither side of his body had reason to envy the other.

The servant of God suffered in every part of his frame; none of his members could escape. The little room where this operation was carried out was heated up so much by the burning coals that it soon resembled an oven, so filled with smoke that it was difficult to breathe. The Brother who was taking care of the sick man did not dare complain. Having before his eyes a spectacle of patience that impressed him so much, he could not even think of his own discomfort. Seeing De La Salle stretched out on this sort of gridiron, he could not

help recalling Saint Lawrence, who had been roasted over a slow fire, and he judged by the generosity of the holy priest what strength charity must have imparted to the young deacon martyr to enable him to endure this cruelest of all tortures. The Brother was curious to find out how hot were the slats on which the patient was laid. He soon came to understand what De La Salle suffered, because on touching them, he found that he could not keep his hand on them or stand their temperature. The only relief that the pious patient allowed himself during this cruel procedure was to sigh and to repeat continually but softly the following words: *My God!* Even more frequently were these others which he constantly had on his lips: *God be blessed!*

Furthermore, he had to make use of this torture repeatedly. As a rule, rheumatism is a chronic malady which often recurs and which at certain periods of the year becomes more acute. It was, therefore, necessary to utilize this barbaric remedy several times and to put the martyr of penance back on his grill more than once. This state of suffering did not, however, prevent the Founder from keeping an eye on his novitiate and maintaining exact regularity in all the houses of the Brothers. He did not even wait until he was completely cured before going to visit the places where his presence was needed, for he considered his health as of no account whenever the service of God was at stake, and he took pleasure in sacrificing it to his glory.

The reputation of the new Institute began to spread, even as the number of Brothers increased. Virtuous ecclesiastics came to Vaugirard to make retreats directed by De La Salle. Among others, Monsieur Guyart, a canon of Laon, made a fifteen-day retreat under the guidance of this great master of the spiritual life. Impressed by so many examples of virtue which he beheld and touched by the intensity of grace which he felt in this holy house, he left it edified and consoled.

## Hardened sinners come to seek conversion

Thus, the reputation of De La Salle's saintly life spread abroad and brought to him notorious sinners who came seeking from his charity a cure for the infirmities of their souls. He was a fit instrument for God's hand to use in these most difficult operations of grace. God did indeed make use of him to bring about conversions which had been despaired of and which can be considered as real miracles of divine mercy. Indeed, the charity of the holy Superior provided these sinners, steeped in iniquity, with a confessor such as they desired: affable, obliging, patient, and unruffled at the recital of the most horrible crimes which they blurted out to him.

When they opened their consciences lacerated, blackened, and perverted by sin to a man whom they honored as a saint, they were amazed to find him unperturbed, unmoved, and as calm as if they had related to him the life of a saint. They were even more astonished to note that he seemed to entertain a higher regard for them than for himself. Thus in the most wretched souls there was born a confidence in this priest who considered himself a greater sinner than they and who thought he was only doing himself justice by adjudging himself the greatest of criminals.

We shall say no more on this subject here, for we intend to speak of it at greater length in dealing later with the holy Founder's virtues. Let it suffice to mention at this point in the story of his life how God at this time made use of him for his glory and for the salvation of several souls wavering on the brink of despair.

The servant of God's charity obliged him to lend himself to those whom the Spirit of God sent to him, as to a new John the Baptist in the desert, so that they might receive the baptism of penance and learn how to practice it in a house devoted to it. This ministry, however, did not distract the Founder from the attention he owed to his novitiate. Nobody understood better than he that all hope for the future of his Institute depended on the seriousness with which the candidates made their novitiate. For this reason, he would not entrust the guidance of the novices to anyone else. This tender father accompanied his children everywhere; he consoled them, encouraged them, instructed them, addressed to them pathetic and touching exhortations, presided over their various religious exercises, and led them in the most tiresome labors and in the humblest tasks. The Founder showed them in his person with what calm mockery must be endured, how to take pleasure in derision, in poverty, and in the cross; finally, he illustrated for them the meekness with which insults, outrages, calumnies, and persecutions should be received.

The efforts of the zealous Superior, watered by his sweat, tears, and sufferings, were blessed by God. His words fell upon willing hearts and brought forth fruit a hundredfold. The Founder had the joy of seeing his novices, like tender plants, docilely take the direction he sought to give them by allowing him to shape them without any resistance on their part. On their souls, open to grace, he made whatever impressions he wanted. His sons, modeled after their father, showed by their conduct that they had been schooled in virtue by a great master and that they had profited by his instructions and example. Even if the unusual habit they wore had not attracted attention, they would have been noticed because of their inviolable silence,

their unfailing modesty, their perpetual recollection, and their unwavering mildness amidst outrages which showed everybody that they were novices or Brothers of the new Institute.

## Chapter XII

*The famine of 1693–94 forces De La Salle and his novices to come back to Paris to find the means of survival; he endures with them the hardships of the times, but Divine Providence does not abandon them; later he returns to Vaugirard to continue the novitiate; he revises his rules and puts them in writing.*

The house at Vaugirard seemed to De La Salle a paradise of delights. The fervor that reigned there made it a gratifying place for him. He had to leave it, however—at least temporarily—when famine began to make itself felt with greater rigor toward the end of 1693. Vaugirard was no longer a safe refuge for the Brothers. The house was open to anyone who wanted to come in and was entirely unprotected. Occupied only by lambs, it was exposed to wolves. Their food, frugal as it was, excited the rapacity of the starving. It had already happened that the provisions were stolen from the Brothers bringing them from Paris, and the same miscreants or others like them were ready to pounce upon a meal which could be had already prepared, every day at the same place and time. Hearing of the robberies which were being committed everywhere by force and knowing that the food for the community had also been stolen, De La Salle realized that he risked being cut off from his source of supply and that the meals for the community could no longer be brought in safety from Paris to Vaugirard. So he decided that it would be best to move to Paris. He was forced to leave his beloved retreat for a few months and to bring his novices back to the Brothers' house in Paris.

They did not thereby escape famine. Before long, the Founder could say with the Prophet, *There is no bread in the house.* Indeed, although he remained calm in the midst of the general alarm that agitated the public, *he saw the tempest of hunger* threatening his Community and his followers, fearing *the terrible arrows* of starvation which God's hand in anger aims at both just and sinners in order to stir up the piety of the just and to remind sinners of their disorderly

lives. As for him, *he knew how to live in abundance and in penury*; he had grown accustomed to this, thanks to his long and rigorous fasts. Even though he and his Brothers suffered much during those calamitous times, he experienced the truth that *to those who fear God, nothing will be wanting*. What is most admirable is that at a period when the rich as well as the poor feared, with reason, that they might go without bread, he sought in Providence alone the means of forestalling the rigors of this cruel famine. When robbery was to be feared everywhere and nothing was safe from violence, when people disregarded justice and scorned authority, when some stole the crust of bread from others' mouths, he and his followers always had something to eat. They ate sparingly, of course, but without concern for the morrow.

In those days, in Paris and nearly everywhere else, one could see people rebelling, demanding bread, and threatening sedition. Some searched through the heaps of garbage in the streets hoping to find something to satisfy their hunger and gathering for food things that they could not have endured to look at a few months earlier. Others, driven out of the city by starvation, wandered about the countryside seeking herbs, leaves, and roots to eat. During this time, De La Salle gave his disciples, less confident than he as to the future, daily commentaries on these words of Jesus Christ: *See that you do not grow solicitous, saying, "What shall we eat, or what shall we drink, or wherewith shall we be clothed?" For all these things do the heathens seek. Your Father in heaven knows that you need all these things.*

It was a time when there could be found at the gates of Paris, as well as in the city streets, swarms of poor, starving people whose piteous cries would have moved hearts of stone and whose cadaverous faces already bore the imprint of imminent death. The sight was enough to strike terror into the most intrepid souls. Mothers could no longer provide milk for the babies at their breasts. Others barely displayed what remained of a life that was ebbing away. They had lost almost all human appearance, so pale and emaciated were they, so disfigured by hunger. Some poor wretches lay on the ground here and there. Others could barely stand and no longer had the strength to stretch out their hands for alms or to open their mouths to beg for it.

Unperturbed over the future, sure of the care of his heavenly Father, De La Salle patiently awaited from God the food—or at least part of the food—needed each day. When it did not arrive or when it was delayed, he had recourse to the compassion of the One who distributes it, begging for it confidently from our common Father, who never refuses us in our need when we implore him with humility and trust.

Before giving the reader a detailed account of the heroic virtues that the famine provided De La Salle an extended opportunity for practicing, we must recall the various differences of opinion between him and Monsieur Baudran concerning the garb of the Brothers and the founding of the novitiate. Ever since that time, this great man, although so zealous for all sorts of good works, had closed his heart toward the new Institute. He no longer looked upon De La Salle as he had done in the past, no longer showed him the same marks of his goodwill. God permitted this to afford the patience of his servant ample room for exercise, for as we know, the hardest crosses saints have to bear are those fashioned by the hands of virtuous men. God uses the one to sanctify the other and often allows them to crucify each other.

Baudran apparently foresaw that the novitiate at Vaugirard might become his responsibility at a time when charitable donations grew rarer and would have to be shared by a large number of destitute people. He might, therefore, be unable to help out financially, so it was no wonder that he objected to its founding and that he was slow to assist it during the famine. In addition, the venerable parish priest had not forgotten the opposition he had met with on the part of the servant of God to his proposal to change the Brothers' manner of dress. He felt that he did not owe a share in his liberalities to a man whom he considered too inflexible in his convictions.

## Baudran withholds the salary of the Brothers in the rue du Bac

De La Salle began to suffer the consequences of this coolness when the salary of 500 livres due to the Brothers at the school in the rue du Bac was withheld. Baudran himself had established this school and had agreed to pay this sum, but God allowed him to forget this, or perhaps the pastor changed his mind. The fact is that De La Salle and the Brothers had to bear the consequences of his forgetfulness or of his change in attitude, since the failure to pay such an amount of money came as a serious blow during a time of public calamity. The Brothers might have expected the 500 livres and the other donations, knowing the outstanding goodness and charity of the parish priest. This sudden and unexpected refusal and the fact that they, too, were poor left them a prey to destitution, so that they were exposed, as the Prophet says, *to the piercing arrows of famine and to feel its cruel wounds.*

To be brought to such an extremity must have seemed very trying to a man born into a wealthy family, reared in the lap of luxury,

and nurtured on the choicest food, a man who had been wealthy himself and could have lived in the most comfortable circumstances if he had not divested himself of everything. On such an occasion, almost anyone else, less given to God, might have allowed regrets over his sacrifices and his renunciation to penetrate his soul and might have reproached himself with having been indiscreet and imprudent. But he, immovable amid the storm of famine, never lost his peace and his confidence in his heavenly Father. Still, to put his trust to the extreme test, God allowed it to happen that he reached the point where he had absolutely nothing left: no bread, provisions, or money, not even the barest necessities of life. The bread had been served up parsimoniously, but finally there remained no food in the house nor any money to buy more. Saying to the Brothers, *We have no bread in the house*, he encouraged them and exhorted them to be patient. He seemed so content that none of them showed any chagrin.

At times it happened that they left the refectory as hungry as when they had come in and that the thanksgiving after meals followed hard upon the blessing before them; sometimes the whole meal consisted of a thin soup made from herbs. Even when they arose as they had sat down, fasting, they left the table with the renewed joy which the Spirit of God pours out into the hearts of all the truly poor men of the Gospel. Thus their souls were refreshed even though their bodies remained fasting. Once, they were agreeably surprised. Expecting nothing for dinner on entering the refectory, they found a small amount of very black bread. De La Salle presented it to the community but kept none for himself. Nobody would eat any until he did. Forced in this way, he took a tiny bite. His example was followed by all. Each took such a small amount that there was some left over. This bread was the result of a diligent search by the bursar, who apparently received it as an alms.

This insignificant, short-lived relief left them all as famished the next day as they had been before. The lack of food continued for so long a time and remained so severe that it wore down the most resolute courage and the most heroic patience. Finally, the long-suffering of the Brothers gave way, and they found fault with their Superior for pushing too far, as it seemed, their confidence in God, for even during this time of supreme calamity, he continued taking in new candidates who were driven more by hunger than led by a true vocation and who, by augmenting the number of mouths, merely added to the common wretchedness. Nothing upset or frightened De La Salle or shook his trust in God's Providence, in whose arms he rested without any concern, like a little child asleep on its mother's bosom.

## Divine Providence comes to the rescue

God, whose loving Providence had never abandoned him, gave a new proof of his solicitude to his servant and to his disciples, who were all at the last extremity. God showed that he had not forgotten them and that he had not overlooked their needs. After putting its virtue sufficiently to the test, God took pleasure in providing for his family by an unusual happening.

Baudran, peeved with De La Salle as we have said, had forgotten him, and his charity seemed asleep as far as the latter's needs were concerned. However, God had his own way of awakening him. One day, when there was nothing in the house in the way of money or food except one coin worth four sols, the Brother in charge went out to buy some cabbage for what promised to be the last meal for a community which, after eating it, had nothing to look forward to but starvation. This Brother sought to buy some respite against death by purchasing a few vegetables. He might have said, somewhat like the widow of Sarepta, "I am going to buy a few cabbages to prepare for the Brothers and after this respite from hunger to wait with them in patience for the end to come."

But that day God inspired him to present himself along with other beggars at the door of a charitable lady who was distributing alms. The noise made by this rabble had caught his attention. He saw this crowd of poor people stretching out their hands for charity and was moved to join them. When he did, his tall stature and his habit caught the eye of the charitable lady, who was quite surprised. She made him come in and asked him what he was doing out there among that throng of starvelings waiting for a trifling sum of money. "Is it possible," she asked, "that the famine is making itself felt among you, too? Is the parish priest letting the men who have the first claim on his charity suffer from want? The very men whom he employs to teach the poor children?" The Brother replied with much simplicity that his community was reduced to the last extremity, that for quite some time it had been suffering the effects of the famine, and that he was just then on his way to buy some cabbage with the four sols, the only money left in the house. He was going to serve the Brothers a meal which might well be their last.

The virtuous lady was more and more amazed at his tale. *Go in peace*, she told him; *I shall see about it.* She did so indeed, because she went and called to the attention of Baudran the extremity to which the community of his teachers was reduced, the men to whom he had entrusted the education of the poor children of the parish. As

this lady was one of the major contributors to the parish fund for the relief of the poor, Baudran paid attention to what she had to say. Her remonstrance was like an order for him, and he did not delay in sending De La Salle a little money to take care of the most pressing necessities of the house. Nevertheless, his heart, which had opened—whether by compassion for the wretched state in which the Brothers were or out of regard for a person from whom he received such generous contributions for the parish—soon closed again. About the middle of January 1694, when the famine was raging most cruelly, whether Baudran had exhausted all the funds he had left or whether he felt that he owed no special consideration to the Brothers over other needy persons, he informed their Superior that he would not give him anything more and that he would consider what he had given him at the end of the previous year as an advance on the salaries of the Brothers who taught in the parish.

Once again, De La Salle's patience was sorely tried. Once again, he saw his community reduced to extreme want; his children asked him for bread, and he had none to give them. What will he do in this new affliction? Fasting and prayer are two certain means of obtaining everything we want from the Father of all mercies. De La Salle employed both of them. Filled with confidence, he went to the church on the eve of the feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul and prostrated himself at the feet of Jesus Christ to lay the needs of his family before him and to beg him to remember that he was its true Father.

Apparently, when he finished this prayer, the servant of God was inspired to go to Baudran with a kind of presentiment that he would be heard. He did go to see him and reported the desperate plight of his family. He could not have come at a more favorable moment, because Baudran had just received a sum of money from the king for the relief of the poor in his parish. His joy over getting such sorely needed help at such an opportune time, just when conditions were most tragic—help which enabled the charity of the pious pastor to reveal itself—enlarged his heart and inspired him with pity for the needs of the Brothers and their Superior. He embraced him and gave him 200 livres on the spot, promising that he would not take into account the extra money paid the previous year and that he would send him 200 livres more in two or three weeks, a promise which was kept. Thus the servant of God received a new proof that divine goodness never fails those who hope in God.

As a matter of fact, however, Baudran's help was slim enough; the 400 livres did not last very long in a house where everything was wanting. When this sum was exhausted, De La Salle found himself

once more in the same abject penury as before. He had no other recourse than to apply once again to Baudran, hoping to find in the latter's charity the help that all the needy had a right to expect and trusting that the heart of the pastor, so easily moved by the plight of the poor people in his parish, would show compassion toward that of the Brothers.

For the moment he was not disappointed. The pious pastor, touched by the difficulties of the community, agreed to provide the bread they needed, and at De La Salle's request, he gave the orders to his baker to send the community a fixed quantity daily. This gesture agreeably surprised the servant of God. Bread, the staff of life, was the main thing he wanted and the principal staple consumed in his poor family. The rest might be lacking, but if bread was assured, he did not worry too much. But if his joy was great, it did not last long. He had deceived himself in thinking that Baudran would give him the bread necessary for his community out of pure charity. If Baudran had in fact intended to do this, he did not take long to regret it and even to go back on his word. Toward the end of July, the baker sent him a bill for 800 livres, representing the cost of the bread he had supplied to the Brothers for two and a half months. This bill frightened Baudran and made him rescind his promise, persuaded that he could not sustain such a heavy expense. He even made De La Salle assume this debt, because he refused to give him any money and pretended that he had only intended to advance him the sum he had promised for the annual salary of the Brothers who were teaching in the parish schools.

No matter what De La Salle told him on the subject, Baudran remained deaf to his prayers and remonstrances and would listen to nothing. But Divine Providence again came to the rescue by a sudden drop in the price of wheat and by an even more unexpected return by Baudran to his former sentiments of esteem and love for the Institute of De La Salle. In fact, he promised to give the Brothers 100 livres a month for the rest of the year. This was considerable, even though it did not suffice to cover the cost of the bread, which amounted to 50 écus a month.

But Divine Providence, which had tested the confidence of God's servant by the most painful trials, remained De La Salle's unfailing resource. It provided for the necessities of the poor community in Paris while other far richer religious houses encountered great difficulties in coping with that difficult time. To make De La Salle understand that God alone had provided him with the unexpected help he had received, God once more permitted Baudran to shut his eyes to their

needs. With regard to De La Salle and the Brothers, the pastor seemed to lose the tender compassion he felt toward all other poor persons.

## New disagreements with Baudran over the residence

During the first six months of the following year, 1695, the Brothers received nothing from the pastor who employed them in his parish schools. Worse yet, Baudran refused to pay the rent on the residence which he himself had leased for them and which he had always paid for in the past. In addition, he wanted them to pay the rent for the previous year, 1694, the year of the cruelest privations, which had been for them a year of patient endurance, penance, and extreme poverty. This refusal was motivated by De La Salle's reluctance to move the Brothers from their lodgings in rue Princesse. Baudran wanted to send them to another house in rue Guisarde, and to force them to go, he refused to renew the lease on the first house. But as this second residence was not proper for a community, De La Salle would not accept such an unfavorable change.

Once again, he preferred to risk incurring the displeasure of the parish priest and to suffer, in consequence, the privation of the money which was due him in justice and in charity rather than to expose his followers to the drawbacks of the new house. Hesitant as ever to follow his own opinions, he consulted others on what he should do. The advice he received was to assume the lease on the house in rue Princesse himself, if he could get it. But would this be possible? It hardly seemed so, for what assurance could the owner of the property have that an empty purse could ever furnish the 700 livres annual rent? How could he count on the poorest Community in the kingdom, which lived on alms alone, which had to struggle so hard to secure the bare necessities of life, and which the famine had all but swallowed up in the year just gone by, as it had so many other unfortunates who had died of hunger?

De La Salle, however, who in almost all things hoped against hope, took a chance and leased the house. The agreement, although only a verbal one, held firm to the great astonishment of the servant of God himself, who could not sufficiently admire the action of the Almighty in this affair. It is indeed amazing that the owner of such a large house risked leasing it to men as poor as any in the poorhouse. When Baudran learned of the new lease, he sent for De La Salle and made a scene over it, but the servant of God mollified him by assuring him that he would assume full responsibility for the lease and would himself pay the rent from then on. So the pastor had nothing

more to say except that De La Salle *was a stubborn man who had always wanted to have the upper hand over him and over De La Barmondière*. Yet, with De La Barmondière, the servant of God had always acted according to the advice he got from Baudran, and with Baudran, he was guided by the advice of men for whom Baudran himself entertained the deepest respect.

## He returns to Vaugirard to continue the novitiate

The worst of the famine now over, Paris no longer held any attraction for De La Salle. The racket in the streets, the important people who lived there, the constant turmoil of affairs which went on, made him sigh after the solitude of Vaugirard. So he hastened to go back there as soon as he could, taking with him five or six novices and some of the Brothers. There, at peace in the place of his repose, he seemed once again to forget that he was in this world and that the world itself still existed, so completely occupied was he with God and with the pursuit of perfection. At this he labored like a man who has but one thing to do and who takes that thing totally to heart. Considering that each day might be his last and feeling that he had not yet done anything for God, he sought to please him at every moment and to make his days full by the continual practice of virtue. Keenly scrutinizing the road he still had to travel, he hastened to advance with giant steps without seeking either rest or relaxation. Like the great Apostle, he forgot all that he had done and suffered for God and thought only of what he still had to do and to suffer.

The eight or nine Brothers whom he had left in Paris to teach in the schools of Saint Sulpice would come to spend their holidays and feasts at Vaugirard as they had been in the habit of doing before the famine. Thus they shared the company of their father and joined in the exercises of the novitiate during a good part of the year. Their worthy Superior, in solitude with them, was concerned only with helping them advance on the road to heaven while doing the same thing himself. He thought only of their sanctification and his own; he disregarded everything else and did not even think of it, any more than the dead do in their tombs. In him everything spoke of and incited others to the practice of the most sublime virtues: humility, mildness, mortification, penance, charity, recollection, the interior life, the spirit of prayer, the practice of poverty, and detachment. These virtues shone forth in all he did. He proclaimed them also by his silence and preached them by his constant example. In order to inspire their own fervor, all the Brothers needed to do was to look at him. Since he was

always at their head in the humblest duties, the most servile occupations, and those most distasteful to nature, they learned from his example that whatever we do for the love of God is done with joy.

## How he composes the Rule

When he saw that he was now able to have a certain amount of leisure, De La Salle felt inspired to profit by this to work at composing a Rule. As he had been careful to make experience precede the regulations he wished to establish, all he needed to do was to set down in writing the practices which the fervor of the Brothers had already sanctioned. Such was the wise conduct of this pious Superior. Everything that he planned to include in his Rule he had taken the precaution of having implied by his words and authorized by his actions. By studying Jesus Christ, he had learned to do before teaching, to lead before advising, and to advise before commanding.

In this way, his wise procedure tended to create lasting laws and faithful observers rather than variable laws, the obligation of which is thrown off as easily as it was accepted, thus multiplying infractions and violators of the law. Convinced of this, he had made a long trial of all the regulations which he planned to establish, and the experience of over fifteen years had taught him what he should add to or eliminate from the customs previously introduced. When he collected them all together in a code of rules, he was merely proposing practices which everyone had accepted and recognized. The least perfect among the Brothers could not object to them, because nobody was imposing new restraints on them; only that which had already been established was being reduced to writing.

Before taking up his pen, however, this new Moses, as was his wont, had sought the light and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and to draw down these on himself, he made use of fasting, prayer, and fresh practices of penance. When he had done this for a considerable time with great fervor, feeling his heart open to heaven's will and filled with the Spirit of God, he put together the collection of his rules.

Nor did this suffice. The humble Superior did not wish to impose anything by his own authority. He wanted everything to be adopted by the consent and goodwill of the Brothers. Although as their father, Founder, and leader he had every right to lay down laws for them and to make them submit to them, he had the humility never to impose anything on them without their agreement. He proposed to their judgment and submitted to their decision his concepts, sentiments,

and desires, eliminating whatever they were unwilling to accept and to confirm by their own approval.

As he had always acted before, so did he now act on this important occasion. He gave the collection of rules, such as they still exist today, to an assembly of the older Brothers to read and examine. He allowed them full liberty to make any remarks they chose and to tell him frankly what they wished to see added to or eliminated from the text. When each one had offered his observations, he listened with meekness and docility to what they had to say, and they all found him ready to make changes according to their desires. But these good sons were convinced that their virtuous father had greater insight by himself than all of them put together and that he had included in the Rule only what the Holy Spirit had inspired him with and what custom had authorized. They therefore received the Rule with respect and submission, and with one mind and heart, they approved all the articles contained in it.

The attitude of a humble and docile heart which led De La Salle and even obliged him in all things to submit the Rule he had just written to the approval of his disciples was in him a permanent and habitual disposition, not only on this point but on all the rest. Later on, when some less perfect Brothers told him that the Rule was too irksome and too austere, they found him ready to make whatever changes wise and enlightened men might suggest. Take this Rule, he would say, to three religious superiors as virtuous and as enlightened as can be found. I submit it to their judgment and willingly accept the additions and modifications that they may see fit to make.

## Specific regulations for recreation

The only major change De La Salle made in the customs already in force was with regard to the community recreations. These took place among the Brothers, as they usually do in most other religious groups; all had the liberty of speaking as they wished, without restraint. In this way, unfortunately, certain defects had crept in. A practice needed for the relaxation of the body was becoming dangerous for the soul.

If the disorders flowing from recreation that is scarcely Christian had not yet been noticed in the Community, at least it was to be feared that with the passage of time and a slackening of fervor, such abuses might creep in. As he did not think that in this matter he could expect for his Institute a special privilege which no other order has ever received, he considered it wise to see how he could prevent this

from happening. The simplest remedy, if it had been feasible, would have been to do away with such a dangerous activity altogether, since it is so easy to abuse it to our detriment. Some relaxation is necessary for both mind and body, however, and human frailty can scarcely do without it. The bow that remains constantly bent ends up by snapping. A mind that is forever under constraint grows exhausted. Exercises of piety become wearisome and unpleasant if never interrupted. Only in heaven can we live by the spirit alone and find rest and ever-renewed satisfaction in the actual, exclusive, and constant exercise of the love of God. As long as we remain in this mortal body, the burden of which weighs down the soul and directs its desires to things below, we need recreation even as food and sleep are needed. The great secret is to recreate ourselves in a Christian manner and to sanctify ourselves in the process.

This secret De La Salle had sought for a long time; to discover it, he had recourse to prayer. After the example of the saints, he had made it a rule for himself never to do anything of any importance without consulting God at length and often. To achieve purer and more prolonged prayer, he was in the habit of going on retreat. He made one, therefore, when he was trying to decide what to do about the recreations and to learn from God the secret of making them proof against the defects which are so commonly found in them and which make them occasions of disorder.

What he did after this retreat will indicate to us the resolution he was inspired to take regarding the means of sanctifying the recreation of the Brothers. At the same time, it will illustrate for us with what gentleness and wisdom this prudent Superior implied, by his own example, the practices he wished to introduce into the Community. On leaving his retreat, he told some of his most fervent disciples the plan that God had inspired him to adopt concerning this matter, and he begged them to help him introduce several new rules regarding it. We shall not mention them here, since we shall have occasion to discuss them farther on.

Once De La Salle had arranged as he wished in a codified body of rules all the practices and customs followed in the Community, he thought of enriching the Community with other works which would be of use to the Brothers and to the schools. Among these were the volumes on Christian civility, some instructions on holy Mass and the manner of hearing it well, the book on how to receive the sacraments of Penance and Holy Eucharist with profit, and catechisms of all sorts: short ones for the children, others for the Brothers which were more developed, thorough, and scholarly and included moral teaching and

pious practices. These are the sources where the teachers in the Christian Schools can find material to help them explain the great truths of religion. He also composed meditations and prayer books for the personal use of his disciples.

## CHAPTER XIII

*Perpetual vows are introduced among the Brothers; De La Salle uses the occasion to try once again to resign as Superior but in vain; he obtains from the archbishop of Paris permission to set up a chapel in the novitiate house; the opposition he encounters from the parish priest of Vaugirard.*

The Brothers who were fervent and firmly attached to their vocation had not lost either their longing for perpetual vows or their hope of pronouncing them. Vows for one or three years seemed to them too temporary an engagement. They did not fear to take on definitive obligations with regard to a Master who is immutable by nature and infinitely good by essence. They felt that they only half belonged to God as long as the ties that bound them were not indissoluble, and they trusted that God's grace would afford them the strength that their wills did not find in themselves. Determined to belong to God without any possibility of turning back, they felt ashamed at not yet having made to God the full sacrifice of their liberty.

"Shall we," they asked De La Salle, "not be attached any closer to God than farm laborers are to the master they serve? At the end of their year of service, they can move on and enter the employ of someone else or renew their yearly contract with the first. With one foot inside the house where they labor and the other outside, they are always ready either to stay in or to get out as their interests may require. None of the proprietors can count on their services beyond the stipulated time, because none of them possesses the hearts of these mercenaries. Are we not serving God after the fashion of these paid laborers by binding ourselves to him for a year only or for three at most? Once this period has expired, we are again as free as air. Unfortunately, in thus recovering our liberty, we once more find the cause of our ill-regulated conduct, and this can lead to the loss of our souls. If the sacrifice of our freedom were made once and for all, we would have to persevere in our holy state. This act would fix our wills

irrevocably, and by binding ourselves forever, we would attach our hearts definitively to God."

De La Salle was happy to hear such words, and his silence gave the Brothers a chance to repeat them often. He enjoyed hearing them express such desires but was unsure whether they were really mature and arose from deep-rooted piety or were merely superficial aspirations. He preferred to disregard them and seemed not to pay too much attention to them. By this apparent indifference, however, he wished to find out what spirit moved his disciples and whether human considerations or the Spirit of God led them to insist on making perpetual vows. Longanimity and perseverance, which are gifts of the Holy Spirit, are also signs of divine inspiration, and it was these signs that the wise Superior awaited to let him know what he should think of the wishes of his disciples.

Although he saw their constancy, he chose to temporize before giving them any hope of being satisfied. To test their dispositions further, he told them at the beginning of 1694 that he would allow them four months, until the feast of the Most Holy Trinity, to reflect on the matter. He also wrote to the senior Brothers who were away from Paris in the four other houses, asking them to think seriously about the matter and to recommend it to God in prayer. As for himself, as usual he turned to vigils, fasting, prayer, and other austerities to draw down God's grace and light, because he considered this a matter of the highest importance, one which called for serious thought and circumspection.

On the one hand, De La Salle was delighted to see that his children showed such great zeal for perfection and such eagerness to belong entirely to God. On the other hand, experience teaches that perpetual vows, which by their nature are bonds of perfection, often become occasions of damnation for those who make them rashly. Hence he feared to see his disciples bind themselves in this way without sufficient forethought. Unsure whether the obligations which they wanted to assume would prove to be means by which the Spirit of God might draw them up to perfection or chains by which the evil spirit would drag them down to their destruction, he hesitated, remained undecided, and consulted God unceasingly.

But the divine will was not at all clear to him on this point. Ever wavering, he kept weighing the reasons for and against the idea, and the more he considered it, the more he feared to draw back or to go ahead in a question of such importance and delicacy. As he found within himself neither the light he needed to make up his mind nor sufficiently obvious indications of the divine will, he sought these in

his disciples themselves. To establish them in a condition where they might receive such enlightenment, he called on those whom he judged the most capable of binding themselves by irrevocable commitments to come to make a retreat, one after the other. What he had in mind was: 1) to prepare them for such a sacred and important step; 2) to study at leisure each one's dispositions and to see if he could find in their souls the degree of virtue and grace needed for the decision being considered, and 3) to put each one's soul in a condition where it could be purified and exposed to the rays of the Sun of Justice in order to merit God's divine light.

## De La Salle explains the consequences of perpetual vows

These private retreats of the twelve senior Brothers whom he had selected and who were the only ones he considered ready to take perpetual commitments were over with by the end of the four months. He then called them to Vaugirard, and on Pentecost Sunday, they all began a general retreat which lasted until the feast of the Most Holy Trinity. During this week, the wise Superior did not fail to address to his disciples the necessary admonitions concerning the engagements which they sought to assume. He made plain to them the consequences that these vows entailed as regards their salvation. He instructed them thoroughly on the merit and excellence of perpetual vows, but he also made clear their dangers and the obligations they involve.

He pointed out forcefully that these bonds of perfection often become what Saint Paul calls snares when it is a question of the vow of chastity, which presumptuous or imprudent persons sometimes embrace rashly. Those who have not received the required grace make the vow for their own misfortune. On such slippery terrain, he said, it is better to withdraw prudently than to advance too boldly. A wise and prudent delay in view of testing oneself and of ascertaining God's will cannot have any unfortunate consequences, whereas precipitation might expose one to regrets, perhaps to horrible sacrilege, or at least to requesting shameful and odious dispensations.

Not content with lending them his own insight on this most important point, he wished to learn from their own lips just how far their understanding went. For this purpose, he had the Brothers join him in dialogue where all of them were at full liberty to declare their feelings in this matter. The only topic discussed was that of the vows. Each one said what he had on his mind and shared his opinions with the rest. Judging by the conclusions reached during these colloquies,

it would seem that the Brothers, enlightened by the insights of their Superior in this most delicate matter, did not allow themselves to be carried away by indiscreet fervor, and the outcome was that the perpetual vows pronounced would be those of obedience and of stability. Subsequent events showed how right De La Salle had been in not following the impetuous zeal of his children in this matter, since of the twelve Brothers who bound themselves perpetually by these vows of stability and obedience, only six persevered.

## Three of them are still living

De La Salle wanted the ceremony of making these vows to be kept secret from the rest of the Brothers. He wanted those who would be present and involved in the occasion to appear to forget it and to bind themselves to inviolable secrecy. To make sure that no one else might entertain any suspicion of what was going on, he retired with these twelve Brothers into a remote area of the house where they held the ceremony at their ease and in full liberty. Beginning the ceremony as the first in the midst of the Brothers, he recited his consecration in a tone and with an expression so filled with unction and devotion that he reduced them all to tears.

## De La Salle pronounces his vows first and with devotion

His vow, which was the same for all the others, came to this: that he consecrated himself to God to procure his glory as far as he was able, and for this purpose, he joined himself with this one and that one, naming the twelve Brothers, to keep together and by association the Gratuitous Schools, and so forth, and that he was making a vow of obedience both to the body of the Society and to its superiors. To this he added the vow of stability in the Society for all his lifetime. The formulary of these vows was signed by him in this way: *J. B. de La Salle, Roman Priest.*[9] All the other Brothers, imitating him, pronounced the same vows, one after another.

## He strives to have the assembly elect another as Superior

This assembly of twelve principal Brothers linked to one another and fixed by vow in their vocation seemed to offer the humble Founder

9. Blain is in error here. The original document preserved in the archives of the Generalate in Rome shows the signature *De La Salle*, with no *J. B.* and no *Roman Priest.*

another favorable opportunity for relinquishing the first place. His humility, still displeased at having to occupy it, had never given up the idea of having a Brother replace him. Once before, he had taken advantage of a similar gathering to put forth this plan, and he had done it so skillfully that he had succeeded as fully as his passion for humility desired.

More than ever, De La Salle hoped that he would succeed again in this second assembly, similar to the prior one. Ever eloquent on this subject, he was prepared to put forward the same reasons which on the former occasion had won the Brothers' votes while misleading their good judgment. The respect, affection, and attachment that they felt for him gave him an advantage over them, and he hoped that their reluctance to refuse him what he asked or to cause him any chagrin would induce them to grant him the last place once again, in spite of his priestly character. With this in mind, the Founder called the Brothers together again the next day and spared nothing to win them over and to make them accept his point of view. Laying aside the reserved air which he usually assumed, he adopted a more familiar, engaging, and insinuating attitude by opening his heart to them in such a way as to lead them where he wanted them to go.

Among other things, he told them: "Since Providence had now joined them in a body through the perpetual vows they had pronounced the previous day, it would be wise to seek means to make this union so strong and so permanent that neither the world nor the devil could alter it. The first such means was to place all their trust in God alone, remembering that those who rely on mortal man are leaning on a frail reed which, as Scripture says, when it breaks pierces the hand that holds it. As for himself, they should consider him only as a poor priest who lacked both the power and the prestige to uphold them and their Society. It was the height of folly to count on any man and to base their hopes on human resources. They should recall that although he had recovered from a mortal illness three years previously, he might find himself again at death's door any day, and in that case, they would be obliged to elect someone else as Superior. Hence, it was better to provide for this eventuality ahead of time rather than wait for it to happen and be forced to make a choice. Strong reasons demanded that they do this without further delay, for if they kept on putting it off until his death, this could bring about very serious consequences for their Society."

He added that "the second means of rendering their union indissoluble would be to have as their head one of themselves, someone who was not a priest. The sacerdotal character would place a vast gulf

between them and such a Superior. This would weaken their union, and inferiors not closely united to the one who governs them are like a body in which the head and the members are badly joined and which consequently remains either lifeless or languishing. It was time —and high time—to take away from him the government of the Institute, and if they delayed in doing so, they would come to regret it.

"The first result of neglecting this advice of his would be that if he happened to die, there would spring up as many superiors as there were schools. This diversity of leaders would infallibly cause divisions in the flock. Once the sheep were dispersed, they would lose contact among themselves and all subordination to a common shepherd. Then, not following the same line of conduct, they would cease to have the same spirit, convictions, and sentiments. These diverse groups, no longer constituting a single organism, would adopt differing ideas and modify their doctrine, their way of life, and their habit. Very soon this division would cause their ruin. These Brothers, going their separate ways, could not be replaced save by men having different talents, customs, and views. Before long, they would see hired teachers taking over the schools, which—once they ceased to be gratuitous—would cease to be Christian and would no longer prove effective in the education of poor children."

"Suppose, for the sake of argument," he continued, "that the various ecclesiastical superiors of the localities where the Brothers are established should agree on giving you, after my death, only one priest as your Superior (a highly improbable supposition). Would he be the right man to lead you? Would he understand the spirit of a community? Of yours in particular? Would he follow its rules? Would he be willing to adopt your manner of living? Could he sympathize with you or you with him? Would you be prepared to give him your confidence? Would he be prepared to live with you as one of you? Even supposing that he were a saint, a man filled with the Spirit of God, zealous for the salvation of his neighbor, full of charity and tenderness in your regard, would he be the right man for you, not having been brought up like you and with you? In addition, his dignity as a priest would always create a gap between you and him, and with his being unacquainted with your customs, traditions, principles, and practices, how could you have but one heart and one soul with him? Would he not wish to change your rules? In a word, would he be the right sort of person to direct you? How long would it take him to acquire the experience needed to govern you according to the spirit of your Institute? Would it not call for a miracle to find a man really apt to govern you? Can you expect such a miracle? If not, why delay in doing away

with your present priest-superior and in making it a law for yourselves never to give this title to anyone clothed in this dignity?"

## The Brothers unanimously elect De la Salle as Superior

His discourse was moving; the reasons advanced were impressive and conclusive, and De La Salle expected that they would win the assent of the Brothers. He did not doubt that they would have the same effect as they formerly had in similar circumstances, but he was mistaken. The Brothers had been swept away on the first occasion by the cogency of these arguments, but this time they did not yield to them. They remembered the mistake they had made, the reproaches addressed to them for it, and the embarrassment that had overtaken them when they had put the feet at the head and the head at the feet. I mean when they had allowed De La Salle to be vanquished by his own humility and had permitted this former canon, this doctor in theology, this saintly priest, the Founder of their Institute, their father and first Superior, to obey a simple Brother, to live in dependence on him, and to submit to him with childlike simplicity.

True, this admirable example of humility and obedience which recalled so vividly that of Jesus when he subjected himself to Joseph and Mary had provided great edification to all, within and without the Community, and had illustrated the virtue of a man who carried his love of dependence and abjection to such lengths. But it had done no honor to those who had allowed the father to abase himself before his children and to put one of them in his place as Superior. By authorizing this, they had committed a fault; they had repented of it and were not in a mood to repeat it. The humble Superior, feeling that the Brothers were not yet ready to satisfy his love of abjection and that they could not bring themselves to proceed to an election which he alone thought necessary and advantageous, sought in the depths of his humility new words of eloquence and fresh reasons to bring them around and to overcome their reluctance. For this purpose, he spoke again with so much vehemence and energy that he worked himself into a profuse perspiration. The Brothers were distressed because of the disappointment he felt over their resistance. They did not want to contradict him, so they feigned to be convinced by his reasons and consented to hold an election.

They said to one another: "It won't do him any good, because he will see himself confirmed as Superior by a unanimous vote. Putting our father back among his own children and choosing one of them to guide him would be to violate the very order of nature and of grace.

If we did this, people would make fun of us as before, saying that our simplemindedness had been duped by his humility. Are we ready to give ourselves once more to the reproach which we heard in the past that we agreed to put the sheep in the shepherd's place, a Brother above a priest, a penitent to direct his confessor? Apart from his priestly dignity, his titles of doctor in theology and former canon place him far above us. And even if he were our equal in these respects, who among us is like him as regards enlightenment, learning, wisdom, experience, virtue, and holiness? Should we go along with his dominant attraction for abasement and obedience which is to the detriment of our Society? Must his humility win out over our duty, our gratitude, and our sense of justice?" These thoughts occurred to all of them, but as they did not venture to express them, they kept them to themselves, and so De La Salle imagined in his humility that he was once again going to be able to occupy the last place.

He was overjoyed when he saw the twelve Brothers get ready to do what he desired and cast their votes for the election of another Superior. Convinced that the Holy Spirit would inspire them to replace him and that he would repeat to them in their hearts what the Founder himself had impressed so forcibly on them, that is, that they should put a Brother at their head, he asked them to make interior prayer for half an hour to prepare themselves to make their choice in a truly supernatural manner and to ask God to show them the one whom he had chosen to be their Superior. So they all made interior prayer, but the language which the Holy Spirit spoke in the depths of their hearts was quite different from that which the humility of the servant of God had inspired. They all resolved that as long as he lived, they would never have any Superior but him. When the votes were cast and the ballots counted, every last one had voted to put back in the Superior's place the one who had wished to relinquish it.

Great was De La Salle's surprise at this turn of events. He had already begun to sing victory in his heart and to congratulate himself on once more being the least among the Brothers. He had flattered himself that they would not refuse him this favor which he expected on account of the services he had rendered them, the supplications he had addressed to them, the forcefulness of the arguments he had laid before them, and the interests of their Society which, according to him, demanded his replacement. But he was disappointed. Confused over their apparent stubbornness in refusing him the last place, he grew rather emotional about the matter; his countenance revealed his agitation. Then, recovering his usual calm, he began to speak and gently reprove them, saying that they were forgetting themselves in

disregarding all the reasons which he had explained to them and which required the choice of a Brother Superior. He said that they were losing sight of the Institute's best interests; indeed, they were ignoring them. He asked them to think of these interests and to come to a better judgment.

In a word, his humility made him indignant on this occasion and seemed to arouse his anger. No one had ever seen him show so much emotion. He was upset and seemed unable to control himself when he saw himself returned to the first place. Anyone else would have accepted the decision in peace, adored God's designs, and sacrificed his yearning for abjection to this manifestation of God's will. Instead, he thought he should make one last attempt to leave his position. His distaste for the first place was all but invincible, and he felt that he should not make fewer efforts to be relieved of it than ambitious people make to attain it. To succeed in this, his only recourse was interior prayer. He begged the Brothers to begin over again, hoping that the Holy Spirit would finally put into their hearts what he had put into his own and make them realize, as clearly as he realized it himself, that he was unworthy and incapable of being their Superior.

Once again, his low opinion of himself led him astray. The Brothers, after giving themselves once more to interior prayer, judged his capacity to guide them on the basis of his humility. They never thought him more worthy to be at their head than when he sought to give them proofs of how unworthy he was of this position. So without conferring with one another, all of them persisted in their inviolable resolve to keep him in the first place. When they had finished praying, there followed a second vote, and the second, just like the first, designated him as Superior, once again by a unanimous vote.

Then the Brothers, feeling themselves emboldened by these repeated and precise indications of where the divine will lay, took the liberty of pointing out to him that he was bound to submit and that by resisting their choice, he was contradicting the will of God. They begged him not to refuse to recognize them as his children and to allow them to honor him as their father. They added that his death, no matter how late it might occur, would always be soon enough to enable them to substitute a Brother as his successor and that the grace they begged of God was not to have to make such a change before the end of his days.

## They agree that after his death, only a Brother would be Superior

The humble father eventually yielded to the pious desires of his children. Raising his eyes and hands to heaven, he submitted to the will of God, now so obviously manifested, and returned to his previous calm. However, the prudent Superior, unwilling that this election should—before or after his demise—serve as a precedent for conferring on some other priest the title and role of Superior of the Brothers, agreed to his election only on condition that all twelve Brothers present should sign the official act of his election and that they should add to this document a statement formally excluding any other priest or anyone in Holy Orders from ever governing the Brothers. They were happy to satisfy his desire on this point in order to have him continue without reluctance in his role as their Superior. Consequently, all signed the following declaration:

"We, the undersigned, Nicolas Huyart [sic], Gabriel Drolin, and so forth, after associating ourselves with Monsieur J. B. de La Salle, priest, to keep together the Gratuitous Schools by the vows which we pronounced yesterday, declare that as a consequence of these vows and of the association which we have formed by them, we have chosen as our Superior Monsieur J. B. de La Salle, to whom we promise obedience and entire submission, as well as to those whom he will assign to us as our superiors. We also declare that it is our understanding that the present election will not have the force of a precedent for the future. Our intention is that after the said Monsieur de La Salle, and forever in the future, no one shall be received among us or chosen as Superior who is a priest or who has received Holy Orders, and we will not have or accept any Superior who has not associated himself with us and has not made vows like us and like all those who will be associated with us in the future. Done at Vaugirard on 7 June 1694."

Thus obliged to remain in the first place which he occupied, De La Salle applied himself with renewed zeal to fulfill his obligations worthily. His whole concern was to model himself on Jesus Christ, to make him live again in his person, and to represent him to the Brothers by reproducing his life and his virtues and by seeking to imprint his image in their souls. The number of his disciples kept growing, but his Community remained just as poor, and the life led there, equally austere.

It was about this time that some important bishops expressed the desire of having Brothers and asked De La Salle to open Christian Schools in their dioceses, but he was not in a rush to accede to their

wishes. He wished to give himself the time needed to train his disciples well and to make them proficient in humility, patience, mortification, charity, and all the other Christian virtues before making them good schoolmasters. As we have already remarked, he was convinced that before trying to sanctify others, they could never be too holy themselves and that they would never make their ministry useful to the public except when they joined notable examples of virtue to the lessons in piety that they imparted to the young, thus adding weight to their words by the holiness of their conduct.

Convinced of this, he preached to his novices nothing but a high esteem for virtue and a great desire to acquire it. By the zeal he manifested to acquire perfection himself, he taught them that it was the *one thing necessary* and that since it depended on their efforts, it was the only thing that deserved such efforts. He said that they would never prove useful to their neighbor except insofar as they were truly virtuous and that real piety is the Gospel pearl, which alone has value in God's sight and which should be purchased at the cost of everything else. He warned them that they should not imagine they could obtain true piety except through long and toilsome efforts and that to find it, they must seek it diligently and painstakingly and labor as hard at it as those do who seek gold in the entrails of the earth or pearls in the depths of the sea.

Almost two years went by like this, in calm and in the pursuit of virtue. About this time, the see of Paris, vacant since the death of François de Harlay, was filled by Louis-Antoine de Noailles, bishop of Châlons-sur-Marne. His arrival brought about some notable changes. During his visitations, the new archbishop took note of various abuses which had crept in, and he was particularly displeased at the great number of private chapels found everywhere. Private chapels had become so common that even ordinary citizens wanted to have them in their country houses. The archbishop resolved to put an end to this situation.

To reform this abuse, Archbishop Noailles issued a decree placing all these chapels under interdict. The one which was next door to the novitiate, where De La Salle was in the habit of saying Mass and giving Communion to the Brothers, was included in this general prohibition. Consequently, the virtuous Founder was caught in a most inconvenient situation. This chapel, so close by, was extremely handy for him and the Brothers. It made it unnecessary for them to go to the parish church, situated at a considerable distance and difficult to reach on account of the almost impassable roads in winter or during spells of bad weather. In addition, by frequenting this chapel, the Brothers

kept away from the people who insulted them, made fun of them, and played tricks on them; it also helped them avoid whatever might have been an occasion of temptation, seduction, or opportunity for frivolity.

## De La Salle obtains permission for a chapel in the novitiate

In this difficulty, the zealous Superior of the Brothers approached the new archbishop, explained the problem to him, and asked for permission to set up a chapel in the house at Vaugirard to celebrate Mass there. He was received in the most gracious and obliging manner by the prelate, who esteemed him and was delighted to show him every mark of consideration. De Noailles knew of this saintly priest and had a high regard for his virtue. When bishop of Châlons, a city not far from Reims, he had heard him spoken of as a saint, for all Champagne had retold the story of the sacrifices and heroic virtue of this canon who had left everything to take charge of a few poor schoolmasters. A man who had given such great examples of virtue had seemed to him, in truth, one of the new men worthy of apostolic times, according to all those who had heard of him.

De Noailles, favorably disposed by the esteem which he had for a long time entertained for De La Salle, was happy to give him this special mark of it. While granting his request, the archbishop also confirmed in writing the oral authorization that his predecessor had given the Founder to establish a community in Paris, and to this he added, without any limitation of time, all the powers the Founder needed to exercise his ministry, a favor he granted to very few priests. By this token of special consideration, De Noailles wished to indicate that De La Salle was a distinguished man in his judgment and an even more distinguished one in his heart. In fact, this prelate preserved these sentiments toward De La Salle until his death. He always saw him with pleasure, received him cordially, and granted his requests with kindness, and when he met any of the Brothers, as he did, for instance, at Saint-Denis-en-France when he was making a visitation there, he would ask them for news of their Superior and urge them to recommend him to his prayers, adding, *He is a saintly man; I ask for his prayers.*

## The pastor of Vaugirard objects to the novitiate chapel

Thus provided with the authorization of his archbishop, De La Salle did not delay in making use of it. He had an oratory set up in the

most appropriate room in the house, and he himself helped erect the altar. This little chapel, outfitted in a few days, was blessed by one of the vicars-general, who came for this purpose. The joy of the little flock and of its shepherd was indeed great.

It was, however, soon disturbed by the parish priest of Vaugirard. Although he was De La Salle's friend, he was upset over this innovation and came to complain to him about it. The strange thing was that he had endured patiently and without objection the existence of the private chapel in the home of a layman nearby and had not found fault when De La Salle brought the Brothers there to say Mass for them and to give them Communion. Yet now he seemed to take offense and even scandal when he saw this chapel opened in the Brothers' house after the other one was shut down, even though the Brothers' chapel had been erected with the express and written consent of the chief pastor of the diocese. In spite of this, the parish priest made a great deal of fuss about it. Without any consideration for the Superior and for the venerable authority which granted the canonical right to have a chapel, he made its opening a crime for De La Salle.

According to the pastor, the deed was scandalous because it withdrew the Brothers from his parish. In addition, like the good doctor from the Sorbonne which he was, he appealed to theology in order to intimidate the conscience of the Founder and to make him entertain a scruple over the bad effects this step was going to produce in the locality. He added that he could not understand how a man who professed such attachment to the Church's regulations seemed to care so little about ignoring them on such an essential point and that he was depriving the Brothers of the merit they could gain by assisting at the parish Mass. His example would be an excuse for the rest of the parishioners to stay away also, and thus he would have to answer to God for the harm his nonconformity would occasion.

Fundamentally, this pastor of Vaugirard was a good priest who did all this solely because he thought his pastoral duty required it. He honored De La Salle for his eminent virtues, and he admired the Brothers as well. The more he cherished the one and esteemed the others, the more eager he was to see them come to Mass at his parish church and thus edify all his people. Their staying away was something he could not swallow. He was prepared to accord his esteem and friendship to De La Salle provided that he obtained satisfaction on this point which he had so much at heart.

He appealed to all his erudition to prove to him in strictly logical form, therefore, that he should give up his private chapel and bring the Brothers back to the parish church. Good example, the Church's

regulations, the danger of giving scandal and of providing others with an excuse for not attending parish services—in a word, all the arguments that a good theologian can so skillfully marshal were invoked in order to make it a question of conscience for the Superior of the Brothers of the Christian Schools if he and his community failed to attend the parish Mass and Office. It must be admitted that all the reasons advanced by the parish priest of Vaugirard were excellent in themselves, but they admitted of exceptions and did not nullify the privilege granted by the highest authority in the diocese. The conclusion to be drawn from these arguments was that a good Christian should include among his other duties that of assisting at the sermons and instructions given by his pastor and at the parish Mass. Nevertheless, they did not do away with the right that the archbishop had given to the pious Founder to establish a community and to erect a chapel in his community house.

De La Salle listened with much composure to the complaints of the parish priest and paid great attention to his arguments. He honored the pastor even more highly than he was honored in return; they were good friends. The servant of God was persuaded that the pastor was only doing what he conceived to be his duty as a good parish priest, full of zeal for the best interests of his parish. He would have wished with all his heart that he could have satisfied him and attended the services in his church, if he had been able to bring there in safety and without so many inconveniences the group of young novices, who needed to live a retired life subject to their Rule and who must be watched over and not allowed outside their own house. So the zeal shown by the pastor of Vaugirard for having his church filled on Sunday only stimulated that of De La Salle to keep his young men away from a place which, while infinitely holy because of the presence of Jesus Christ, still offers serious dangers to young novices, who have only recently left the world.

The man of God then entered into a dialogue with the parish priest, agreeing with him that as a general rule, his position was sound and admiring him for pleading it so vigorously. "It is a praiseworthy thing in a pastor," he added, "to want to see his sheepfold filled, and his zeal in carrying out all the duties of his mission is highly edifying. Certainly, the mind of the Church is that people should frequent their parish churches, at least all those who are free to do so. She even makes it a law to assist at the parish High Mass and at the instructions of the parish priest, if one can do so without any major inconvenience, as the last General Council explains concerning this point of law."

"But there is no rule without exceptions, no human law which cannot be dispensed from, no superior authority which does not have the right to grant privileges. If the rule about attending Mass in the parish church can admit of exceptions, surely we should exempt from it a group of young men who cannot leave their residence without danger. We would allow an exception in the case of a man menaced with prison. If such a man, to avoid capture by the police, came to hear Mass early in the morning, we would excuse him from attending the parish Mass. Let your charity do likewise for those who cannot appear in public without risking their vocation and incurring detriment to their souls. If this ecclesiastical law, like all others, admits of dispensations, who deserves one more than these young men, who have not yet put aside all the worldly inclinations they once experienced? They cannot appear in the midst of the world without feeling a renewed attraction for it welling up in their hearts and without being exposed to mockery, derision, and insults which their virtue is still not strong enough to endure patiently.

"If you agree that superior authority has a right to grant dispensations, respect the authority of our archbishop, who has permitted me to establish a community and to erect a chapel, even if this privilege seems to involve an exemption from fulfilling some of our duties in the parish. In effect, how can you demand that those who have rules, special exercises, and a type of life entirely different from that of seculars—who, in a word, form a sort of special parish—should be present in your church, where there is nothing for them to gain for their souls?"

After these introductory observations, the servant of God begged the parish priest to consider seriously the danger run by these young novices, recently come from the world, who had not as yet lost their inclination for, their attraction to, or their curiosity about the world, if they had to attend services in the church, where people—who often came there from Paris—gave examples of conduct that was hardly to be imitated. True, by bringing them to the church, he would be bringing them to a holy place, but it was also true that even in the presence of Our Lord, they could see dangerous sights capable of leading their hearts astray or at least of distracting them and causing their fervor to cool. The pastor himself could not keep out of his church many suspicious and questionable characters whom the proximity to Paris drew thither on Sundays and feasts. Nor could he make sure that the roads leading to the church were free of young scamps who enjoyed making fun of the Brothers. In sum, he could not deny that novices, who need recollection, the practice of the interior life, and

much solitude in order to withdraw their minds from the vain images of the world and of creatures, could not frequent the parish church without running the risk of losing, not gaining, piety; consequently, he begged the pastor to approve his need to keep them restricted to the house.

The dialogue thus concluded was not followed by the success that either of the interlocutors expected. Just as the parish priest did not succeed in convincing De La Salle, neither did the latter persuade the former. He agreed, however, to go on the first Thursday of each month to celebrate a Solemn Mass of the Blessed Sacrament in the parish church and to bring the Brothers with him. He kept his word. De La Salle carried the Blessed Sacrament in procession, sang High Mass, and officiated at the entire ceremony with the recollection, modesty, and devotion of a saint. During this time, he was so absorbed in God that the deacon was often obliged to remind him of what he had to do next. Like him, his disciples showed themselves so recollected, so devout, and so completely prostrated before God's majesty that the whole parish was highly impressed and joined in their devotion. That day, Vaugirard was no longer recognizable as Vaugirard. The parish priest, even more deeply edified than his parishioners, felt more eager than ever to get the Brothers and their Superior back to his parish. He renewed his pleas and begged them not to refuse him this consolation. As he did not succeed in convincing them, his disappointment only increased, and sometime later, it burst forth in full fury.

On the feast itself of the most Blessed Sacrament, the parish priest—more disappointed than words can express, because he had not been able to overcome De La Salle's opposition either by the arguments he advanced or by his insistence—tried to win from him by violence what he had not been able to obtain through friendship. For this purpose, he came to the community and disturbed its silence and peace by his outcries and bitter complaints. He raised the specter of scandal and disorder. According to him, everything was topsy-turvy in the Church of God because the novices did not participate in the procession of the Blessed Sacrament. At that very time, they were reciting the Office, and by paying close attention in order to recite it piously, they remained deaf to the unaccustomed uproar that had invaded this sanctuary of silence.

The parish priest became more enraged because his voice was covered by the voices of the Brothers who were singing the praises of God, and he only redoubled his protests. He upbraided the Brothers for a devotion which kept them within their residence when, in his

opinion, they should have left it to pay honor and homage to Jesus Christ as he was carried in the procession. In vain did De La Salle try to calm him down and to justify his own conduct by alluding to the many inconveniences which he feared if his novices went outside. The parish priest would listen to nothing and departed even angrier than he had been on his arrival. Some time later, however, he resumed his friendship with De La Salle, who, in order to placate him, occasionally brought his community to Mass in the parish church, especially on Easter and on the feast of Saint Lambert, the patron of the parish.

The parish priest of Vaugirard was not the only one with whom the holy Founder ran into difficulties on the same subject. The most pious pastors are the most zealous for getting people to attend services in their parish churches, and a number of them caused trouble for the servant of God by their importunate demands and by their complaints which were basically and generally unreasonable. These saintly parish priests wanted to make faithful parishioners out of men who lived under a Rule. By this they showed that they indeed had the spirit of their own state but that they did not understand what community life requires.

Some years later, when De La Salle established the Brothers in Rouen and opened his novitiate at Saint Yon in the suburb of Saint Sever, two of the best parish priests in the city became his enemies and denounced him repeatedly to the ecclesiastical authorities in an effort to make his Brothers act like model parishioners. The pastor of Saint Sever was a worthy and zealous man who, because of these qualities, was held in great esteem by Monseigneur d'Aubigné, the late archbishop, a most estimable prelate who loved upright clergymen. It is hard to believe to what an extent this pastor's solicitude for seeing his church filled with parishioners wearied and harassed the Brothers at Saint Yon. He constantly cited them before the prelate's tribunal to have them obliged to assist at the parish services and to bring the novices there also, along with the boarding students.

This was impossible, for a number of Brothers were occupied with keeping guard over the prisoners shut up in the institution, either by the orders of the king, by decree of parliament, or at the request of their parents. Nor were these the only ones who had to be watched. The other boarders, who enjoyed a greater degree of liberty, only sought a favorable moment to escape. It was necessary to keep an eye on them all the time. Yet in spite of the Brothers' vigilance, several of them managed to run away, climbing over the walls, sneaking out through a door left unlocked or by opening it with a forged duplicate

key. When the Brothers, to placate the parish priest or to avoid his harassments, took it upon themselves to bring to church their young boarders, most of whom were kept there against their wills, they had seen several take to their heels with the readiness that prisoners show when they find the doors of their prison ajar. On such occasions, if one of the Brothers wanted to take out after them, either he could not catch up with them or else the remaining ones, profiting by his absence, decamped also.

In vain did the Brothers of Saint Yon make the humblest remonstrances to the parish priest of Saint Sever on this subject. They begged to be excused from bringing to the parish church their young prisoners, whom they kept in the house on the orders of their parents so that they might be instructed and corrected there. The Brothers explained that it was impossible to take them out without giving them a chance to run away. These arguments were considered frivolous, and the pastor would not listen to them. Nothing would satisfy him except bringing these inmates to the parish church, but to do this, it would have been necessary to chain them down.

Concerning the novices at Saint Yon, the parish priest of Saint Sever demanded what the pastor of Vaugirard had previously wanted. The Brothers objected to this, invoking the same reasons that De La Salle had used with the pastor of Vaugirard. These arguments did not satisfy the pastor of Saint Sever. Although he showed himself very charitable toward everybody else, he considered as his enemies those whom he could not have as his parishioners. As time went on, Divine Providence put an end to these harassments, thanks to the recognition of the Brothers' Institute and to their profession of vows, which set the Brothers free, as it does all those who embrace the religious life, from the jurisdiction of the parish priest and from the ordinary duties of parishioners.

The dispute with the late parish priest of Saint Nicolas in Rouen did not go quite so far, because De La Salle put an end to it by having the Brothers who taught in the city go to live in another parish. This parish priest, since deceased, enjoyed an excellent reputation for virtue and was one of the most exemplary, zealous, and pious pastors in the diocese. But like everyone else, he had his blind spots. He would have liked to run his parish and his clergy as if he had been the superior of a seminary. He restricted his zeal to the confines of his parish; any good work which transcended its boundaries was of no concern to him. He did not want people to go outside his parish. He expected them to be as assiduous as he was at the services, to make all their donations to the parish, to limit to the parish all the good that

could be done. Whoever acted thus was his friend. He understood nothing of the exercises of piety required by community life and could not conceive of any beyond those practiced in the parish. He could not admit that the Brothers who lived in the parish should prefer their community prayers to the devotions in vogue in the parish.

The Brothers who teach in the schools do not try to separate themselves from the life of the parishes. On the contrary, they are its firm supporters and attend church assiduously on Sundays and feasts, at the head of their boys. But their Rule requires—it could hardly do otherwise—that they attend services in the parishes where they teach, not in those where their residence may be located, for one of their main duties is to bring their students to church for High Mass and Vespers. This obligation, so essential to the good education of the young and to the Brothers' Institute itself, of attending services in the parish where they go with their students made it impossible for them to frequent the parish where they lived in Rouen. This was what the parish priest of Saint Nicolas complained about so bitterly. He even wanted the Brothers to come, in their turn, to present the blessed bread, something that no other parish priest before him had ever thought of requiring them to do.

As a matter of fact, the poverty of the Brothers dispensed them from having to do this and so did their obligation of being with their students on Sundays and feasts. The parish priest of Saint Nicolas, vexed over this refusal, complained to the archbishop. He did obtain satisfaction of a sort but not exactly the kind he expected: he was told to pay for the blessed bread himself. "Cannot you see," asked Monseigneur d'Aubigné, "that since they are so poor, the Brothers are dispensed from making this contribution for the blessed bread? Since you want them to present it anyhow, buy some, and give it to them; then they can present it back to you at Mass. Your charity, by making up for their indigence, will satisfy your piety."

That was how the matter was resolved. The parish priest had his way and got the blessed bread made as he wanted it. But since he was having it made for the poor, he took care to have it baked inexpensively. Yet, as eager as he was to carry out all his parish duties, he showed himself less so in the future, when he had to fulfill this particular one at his own expense. The pastor was the most punctilious man in the world. Although he could not find fault with an offering which had been prepared to his own specifications, he was irritated, nonetheless, over the manner in which it was presented. None of the Brothers was present when the blessed bread was offered, and this led to more complaints on his part. This time, however, he did not go

to the archbishop, because the favorable verdict he had obtained on the previous occasion was not the sort he cared to see multiplied. He contented himself simply with reproaching the Brothers about this and also their Superior when he later came to Rouen.

In vain De La Salle tried to make the pastor understand that it was impossible to satisfy him on both points: to have the blessed bread made and to come to present it, since the Brothers had to bring their students to High Mass and Vespers in their own parishes and watch over them to make them behave. "This duty," he added, "is something necessary for the proper education of these children, the essential end of our Institute. Should the Brothers abandon their students in order to show themselves at Saint Nicolas? The parish priests of Saint Maclou, Saint Godard, and Saint Eloi would hardly be pleased if their teachers let the students run wild in this way on Sundays and feasts. Would the children not lose on those days the benefit of all the instruction given them during the week? What would be the use of founding Christian Schools if the teachers left the sanctification of the Lord's day to the discretion of these youngsters, ignorant and prone to mischief as they are?"

All these arguments made no impression on the parish priest of Saint Nicolas, who although very glad to find sheep not of his flock come into his fold, could not endure to see his own sheep attend other churches. It happened some years later that he contradicted his own principles, however, because he was delighted to see a certain Sister who did not live in his parish bring her students to his church for services on Sundays and feasts and assist thereat with them. Nor did he pay attention to the protests of the other parish priests involved in this matter. Since De La Salle could not convince the pastor, he decided to find a residence for the Brothers in some other parish, for he loved peace, hated all such bickering, and was ready to sacrifice anything to avoid it.

If we have anticipated somewhat in mentioning these last two events, which did not occur until several years after the period we are now discussing, it was only because the opportunity of speaking of them happened to come naturally at this point. We might have overlooked them later.

# CHAPTER XIV

*The number of De La Salle's disciples increases considerably; he is obliged to look for another house; Monsieur de La Chétardie, the successor of Monsieur Baudran as parish priest of Saint Sulpice, seconds his project; the zeal he showed for the Institute.*

The Lord poured out abundant blessings on the novitiate of Vaugirard. The reputation for virtue which it enjoyed drew to it such a large number of postulants that the house became too small to contain them. De La Salle was thus forced to look for another, more spacious residence. Poor as he was, how could he ever hope to find one? He was not only poor but the father of the poor. To the eyes of the flesh, his house at Vaugirard seemed to be the refuge of all the indigent. Everything was lacking, and it took a truly genuine vocation to keep young men there when they could have lived at their ease in their own homes. Nevertheless, poor as was the sort of life lived there, so many came and went and so many stayed that considerable expenses were incurred. It is difficult to understand how a man who had kept nothing of his fortune could discover the means of meeting the needs of the house.

He found help in the generosity of certain charitable persons and in the support of the parish priests of Saint Sulpice, all of whom were zealous for the Institute of the Brothers and vied with each other when it came to claiming the right to confer favors on it. On the one hand, De La Salle preferred to suffer privations for a long time before revealing his needs. It was only when he found himself reduced to the last extremity that he turned to his benefactors. On the other hand, the Founder did not like to importune them or to go to visit them. He approached them only when it was absolutely necessary, and, as a rule, nothing was known of the community's needs except that which could not be hidden from public view. The Brothers, who were not so detached as he, were sometimes tempted to fail in their trust in Providence and to lay aside provisions when they had a chance. But their Superior, who did not want them to entertain fruitless anxieties about an uncertain tomorrow, would not countenance these precautions which seemed to him an unworthy response to the care Providence had always shown them. And the fact is that Providence never abandoned him. Just when he was poorest and least provided for, God sent him, in the successor of Baudran, a new father, a

zealous protector, and a man eminently capable of furthering his work.

In 1697, upon the resignation of Monsieur Baudran, M. de La Chétardie took possession of the parish of Saint Sulpice. It did not take him long to show that no other good work interested him to such a degree as that of the Christian and Gratuitous Schools. He had inherited not only the parish but also the piety of De La Barmondière and Baudran, and he surpassed them in his generosity toward the Brothers. He even seemed to envy De La Salle the honor of having endowed the Church with such a necessary Institute.[10] In fact, he declared himself its father, defender, and promoter. We shall see what progress the Christian Schools made under his auspices. First, however, we must return to the account of the events that occurred in 1694.

The twelve Brothers who had made vows of obedience and stability and whom the pious Superior had chosen as his twelve principal disciples were dispersed by him among the five houses of the Institute, to be their firm support and foundation stones, as it were. Of those whom he had called in from the provinces, he kept with him several who were not sufficiently well established in virtue and arranged to have their places taken by others whose religious spirit was more solid.

During this period between 1694 and 1698 when the Founder was concerned solely with sanctifying both himself and those whom God had sent him, he took in a goodly number of candidates. He could not close the door to them when they requested admission, especially since the famine had been succeeded by a time of plenty. Therefore, there were no grounds for supposing that in asking for admission, they were actuated by any motive other than that of consecrating themselves to God. Moreover, the novitiate at Vaugirard quickly separated the chaff from the good grain. The life led there was so uninviting for nature that nothing but grace could make it bearable. Nothing but a genuine vocation could survive in such an environment. Our heavenly Father left his servant three full years of leisure and deep peace so that he might cultivate, water, and nurture the young plants whom he had transplanted from the world into his garden.

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10. Rigault observes that this remark provides the key to understanding the entire history of the conflict which later on developed between De La Chétardie and De La Salle.

## De La Salle appoints a virtuous but harsh Director of Novices

After this period, the increasing number of Brothers and the multiplication of his concerns obliged De La Salle to give up the personal direction of the novices at Vaugirard and of the Brothers in the Paris schools and to entrust these functions to two of his oldest disciples. Although these two men were not among the twelve who had made perpetual vows in the Society, De La Salle thought them capable of replacing him during his absences because they seemed pious and endowed with goodwill and zeal for regularity. But experience taught him at his expense that he had chosen badly. These appointments lay at the origin of the terrible persecutions which he had to face during the rest of his life and which on several occasions introduced division into his Community and for a time threatened its spirit and its very life.

These two Brothers did not lack a certain basic virtue, but their religious spirit was of a rather untamed and, so to speak, fierce and unmeasured variety. It was neither enlightened nor prudent. They lived a penitential life and were stern men, hard on themselves and equally hard on others. They could never succeed in moderating the ardor of their zeal, in seasoning their corrections with the salt of wisdom, or in adapting to the human weakness of their subordinates the penances they imposed. They could not gauge the degrees of strength and weakness, of pusillanimity and courage, and of grace and virtue present in those of whom they were in charge.

Here, as always, the divine judgments are incomprehensible. God often abandons the greatest saints to their own insights, and by the mistakes they make, he shows us that personal opinions, however good and reasonable they may appear, are capable only of leading us astray if they are not specially inspired by the Holy Spirit. God permitted Saint Francis, that apostolic spirit, that divine man who seemed to be led by the Holy Spirit and guided in all things by the hand of Jesus himself, to make a serious blunder when he designated Friar Elias as his successor. In the same way, God several times allowed De La Salle to make some serious mistakes in the choice of men to represent him. If those he appointed had been worthy of his trust or had enjoyed the qualities needed to fulfill their duties properly, his Institute would have made remarkable progress in a short time. Unfortunately, however, the Brothers to whom De La Salle entrusted the direction of his Institute frequently destroyed what he had built up with so much care and sacrifice. Pride or lack of prudence took possession of them. Once at the head of their Brothers, they revealed what they were in

themselves: men lacking insight and prudence, blind guides who could neither direct themselves nor guide others.

We have already mentioned the flourishing state of the communities that De La Salle had left behind in Reims when he came to Paris. If these places had endured as they were, they would have been a fruitful training school for Christian schoolmasters for country parishes and of novices for the Brothers' Institute. But scarcely had the pious Founder absented himself, when the harshness of the Brother whom he had left in charge brought strife and division into the house. The seminary for country schoolmasters fell apart; the junior novitiate closed, and half of the novices left. As we shall see shortly, a second seminary for country schoolmasters was launched in the parish of Saint Hippolyte in Paris, but after a most auspicious beginning, this institution too soon crumbled, also on account of the Brother in charge.

At the period we are speaking of, De La Salle and a large number of fervent novices were about to take up residence in a spacious house. After having had the consolation of seeing his disciples and their good works multiply and his Institute progress, spreading everywhere the bountiful radiance of Jesus Christ, he would have to witness furious storms and tempests assail his work on account of the imprudent actions of those whom he had chosen to replace him, so that for almost twenty years, his Community would totter on the brink of ruin. His protectors became his most violent persecutors. His best friends and advisers turned their backs on him and refused even to lend him the help of their counsel. Bishops who were most inclined to favor him and who honored him as one of the holiest men in France would lose all esteem for him and would feel that they were doing him a favor by not forcing him to vacate his own house. De La Salle himself would be in difficulties with the law and would have to flee to avoid the police and even prison.

During De La Salle's absence, Satan began to test the Brothers, throw them into confusion, discourage them, and make them grow so disheartened with their vocation that a good number of them left the Society. The devil also managed to introduce a new form of government and to alter the Institute's primitive spirit. Before dying, De La Salle would have to witness all these misfortunes and to realize that they all sprang from the harshness and indiscretion of the Director of Novices and the Director of the Paris communities. This thorn remained deeply embedded in his heart for the rest of his life. Only after he got to heaven was he able to obtain a complete remedy for the wound that his Institute had suffered.

## The Director of Novices and the Director in Paris

The Director of Novices of whom I am speaking was, in De La Salle's absence, quick to assume authority but did not know how to exercise it wisely. His imprudent use tended to destroy, not to build up. By making his arm weigh down heavily on the young people he was in charge of and by his harsh corrections and the ill-chosen mortifications he imposed, he made them into malcontents rather than real penitents. Of course, he wanted to imitate De La Salle and to copy him in all things, and what he lacked was not so much goodwill as good sense, but he was like a clumsy painter who disfigures the objects he wishes to depict. He misrepresented his wise Superior while trying to be like him and instead showed himself as he really was. Far from reproducing the original, he caricatured him without being able to surmount the defects of his own character or attain a true likeness to De La Salle. By his faulty imitation, he dishonored the very man whom he was trying to resemble.

De La Salle had always been in charge of his novices and had instructed them more by his example than by his words. In him everything spoke to and impressed others. His fervor aroused the most sluggish and brought the most negligent back to the path of duty. When he wanted to correct anyone, it was often not necessary for him even to open his mouth; his countenance did it for him. His attitude, facial expression, and gestures were enough to keep others faithful to the Rule or make them return to it; they prevented faults or led to their being atoned. Kind, affable, ready to oblige, he won all hearts and inspired their trust in himself. Enlightened and clear sighted, he could read what was hidden in their consciences. His appearance was always cheerful, serene, calm, and gracious. He attracted even the most timid persons and made them feel entirely at liberty. He was ever the same, always equable in his attitude. A person did not need to study his moods or to wait until the right moment struck before approaching him, and whenever some cloud floated over his countenance, people only needed to look into their own heart to find what had displeased him and caused his sorrow. He acted in a cordial, tender, and charitable manner which drew all souls to him; he found the hearts of children in all his disciples because they found in him the heart of a father.

If he imposed penances on them and corrected them, these were always willingly accepted, because it was not ill humor, passion, or natural inclination that inspired them. His kindness tempered them. Nothing but charity was at their source, and rare wisdom regulated

them. Never did he give a blow without measuring the depth of the wound he was about to inflict and without having prepared an effective balm for it. His perfect understanding of all his subjects taught him the different means to use in winning them over. He knew their strengths and weaknesses, their defects and virtues, their passions and the graces they had received. He had the ways and means of weighing and measuring everything in order to balance the severity of his corrections with the gravity of their faults and, even more so, with their individual dispositions.

Furthermore, the rule he had adopted for himself, that is, to command nothing that he himself did not practice and to advise nothing that he had not tried, had won for him a perfect knowledge of different kinds of mortifications and penance and had earned for him the grace of not imposing them except in a judicious manner and with results. His own example, his fervor, and the unction of his words made everything easy and gave him a power over hearts which could not be separated from his person, but which, unfortunately, he could not share with those to whom he had entrusted his authority. Consequently, the exercise of that authority, when not supported by his own example, charism, and prudence, became odious and produced effects totally contrary to what had been expected.

When De La Salle was away, the Director, strict on himself and harsher on others, undertook to correct the slightest faults by sanctions that were exaggerated. He punished right and left without producing the least amelioration, handing out bitter reproofs and imposing severe penances. If he had been amenable to correction himself, his mistakes might have sufficed to induce him to change, because the discontent of these novices, who were imperfect and tepid, was easy to read on their faces. This should have told him clearly enough that he was laying an unbearable burden on their shoulders and that prudence and charity both suggested that he should tailor the mortifications he assigned to the level of the spiritual strength of his subjects.

The young men, excessively maltreated by a hard and pitiless taskmaster, did not fail to complain to their good father. De La Salle consoled them, encouraged them, and tried to heal the wounds in their hearts and to implant therein respect, confidence, and submission toward the one whom he had put in charge of their formation. As sound government requires, he made the inferiors feel that they were in the wrong. He told them that they lacked virtue and obedience by showing their resentment and bitterness, and he obliged them to make up for their bad example by a generous apology and by full acceptance of the chastisement inflicted on them.

The servant of God feared that he might add fuel to the flames if he admitted the mistakes made by the Director of Novices. He feared that he might accustom the novices to complain about the behavior of their guides and in that way encourage immortification, self-will, and pride, which would have led to revolt and the spirit of independence. Therefore, in order to make them learn obedience and death to self early in their career, he left them under this harsh and burdensome yoke. Furthermore, since he still planned to give up the government of the Community and to put his disciples in charge of everything, he sought by all means to transfer confidence from himself to the Brothers he had appointed as leaders, accustoming all the others to do without him and to find him in his representatives alone.

It may be that De La Salle judged the Director of Novices too favorably and did not think he was guilty either of harshness or of imprudence. It may be that he thought experience would correct him of these two defects. Perhaps, ultimately, he felt it best not to condemn a superior on the reports of a few discontented and ill-disposed inferiors. At any rate, he did not feel it necessary to take the matter up with the Director of Novices or to make any remarks to him about it. Thus the latter did not change his conduct, and so with time the wounds he had inflicted only festered. He added new hurts to the old and thus multiplied the malcontents.

This Director of Novices had his counterpart in the Director in charge of the Brothers teaching in the Paris schools. These two men, cut from the same cloth, imitated each other in everything. Both of them had some virtue and a certain piety, but their piety and virtue were devoid of prudence, rooted in moodiness, and characterized by harshness and extravagance. The imperfect Brothers in the Paris schools were no less dissatisfied with their Director than the novices were with theirs. The former, like the latter, not finding in De La Salle's representatives men like him, not finding charitable fathers and kind spiritual physicians, groaned under the yoke of an obedience which was no longer tempered by divine love.

Toward these discontented Brothers, De La Salle observed the same kind of conduct he had shown toward the novices. Acting, so to speak, as a mediator between them and their Director, he tried to bring them back together again, to unite their hearts by the bond of perfect obedience. Constantly trying to bind up ancient wounds and prevent new ones, he wanted them to find peace in patience. He hoped they would become so humble and so mortified that they would not even think of complaining, except of their own shortcomings. He sought to lead them all to this level of virtue. But not all

were capable of rising so high, and we shall soon learn of the crosses he had to carry as a result of the behavior of these two imprudent men whom he had put in charge of the novices and of the Brothers.

## The novitiate moves to a larger and more convenient house

The house at Vaugirard was too small to lodge all the postulants. It was fairly distant from Paris, and this added to the difficulty of transporting provisions every day from the capital. Moreover, it made it hard for the vigilant Superior to watch over the temporal and spiritual concerns of the Brothers and of the novices, since the two groups were separated. All this induced him to seek another place, offering more room, more facilities, and greater proximity to Paris.

There existed such a spot, unoccupied for a long time, which had belonged to the religious of Our Lady of the Ten Virtues, where the children of France[11] had been brought up. It was located a little above the tollgate, near the Carmelites, on the main road leading to Vaugirard. Withdrawn and solitary, spacious and ample, enclosed on all sides by stout gates and well-built walls, containing open spaces and large gardens, close to the city—this property had everything that De La Salle was looking for.

The cost of leasing it was the only thing that seemed to put it beyond his reach. The owner was asking for only 1,600 livres rent a year, but what an enormous sum that was for men as poor as the inhabitants of the poorhouse! Would the proprietor be willing to rent to a man who had nothing, who was responsible for a large Community, who never knew from one day to the next whether he would be able to provide the needed food? Would he himself dare to ask for the lease? Was it prudent on his part—for he had neither funds nor fixed income—to take upon himself an obligation which exceeded the entire value of all the property his Institute owned? These thoughts occupied De La Salle's mind and made him hold off from concluding the lease of this property, so commodious and so necessary. After recommending this transaction to God in prayer, he felt emboldened, and his confidence in Providence, which had never failed him, persuaded him that he could not find any better guarantor than God to assure his solvency.

He mentioned the idea, therefore, to De La Chétardie, who at first showed some surprise. "If you find it so hard merely to live," he

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11. "Children of France" was a term that included the children and grandchildren, not all of them legitimate, of the reigning monarch.

replied, "how will you ever be able to pay such a considerable rental?" However, when he heard the arguments with which De La Salle supported his plan, the pastor agreed with it, and to make his contribution, he increased by fifty livres the annual salary of the Brothers teaching in his parish schools. This unexpected liberality made the pious Founder realize how right he had been to trust in Divine Providence, how agreeable his project was to God, and how little risk he himself would run if he assumed this heavy obligation, relying on the help of heaven. So he signed the lease at the earliest opportunity, and he and his Community took possession of the place in April 1698.

## Madame Voisin donates 7,000 livres to furnish the house

Once he and the Brothers had moved in, the house was peopled indeed, but it still looked bare and unfurnished because the objects they had brought from Vaugirard were so poor and shabby that they were hardly worth transporting, and there were so few of them that they could hardly be noticed in so vast a residence.

Touched by this extreme poverty, De La Chétardie sent one of the Brothers to Madame Voisin, a generous widow, to ask her to extend her liberality to a house which so sorely needed it. This pious lady, who gave abundant alms to the poor of the parish and to various religious communities in Paris, contributed 400 livres on the spot and promised the same amount every year. But what was that to furnish a house sheltering some sixty people, where there was practically nothing, where everything was lacking? The parish priest called her attention to the disproportion between her gift and the needs that existed in this run-down house, and she generously gave him 7,000 livres right away to cover the cost of purchasing the absolutely necessary equipment. This money made it possible to buy beds, curtains, mattresses, clothing, and a few indispensable pieces of furniture. The house assumed a new look and made its inhabitants realize the advantages of its location and the conveniences it offered.

However, if the residence of the novices became somewhat more livable, their lifestyle did not become any more pleasant. When he moved them to a larger location, De La Salle had in mind only to lodge them all, not to give their bodies any more relief. A bigger house was needed to shelter the postulants who presented themselves and those already there, but all who lived in it were not, for all that, any more at ease insofar as nature was concerned. In this new residence, they still drank water only, and the food was no better than it

had been at Vaugirard. The exercises of piety, the mortifications, and the penances went on as before. As the number of novices increased, so did their fervor. Never had the new Institute been so flourishing, and in a short time it would begin to spread out like a great tree, covering Paris, then all of France, and bearing fruit, had the human enemy not succeeded in checking its progress.

The new residence had a chapel once used by the nuns who had lived there. This was enlarged by adding a choir. When it was ready, one of the vicars-general of Paris came to bless it and dedicated it to God in honor of Saint Cassian, martyr. I do not know the reason why De La Salle chose this holy martyr as the patron of his chapel, unless it was that the mission of instructing children in the principles of Christianity, which this saint had exercised, gave him some kinship with the Brothers of the Christian Schools. For in these later times of the Church, the Brothers are doing precisely what the holy martyr did in the early days at the risk of his life; thus it seemed natural enough to have him as their patron. It may also be that Divine Providence, by inspiring De La Salle to take as his patron this saint who was put to death by his pupils, wished to hint that he would himself endure a similar martyrdom because of the many sorrows that his disciples would cause him.

## Opening a third parish school gives rise to a lawsuit

As De La Salle found in De La Chétardie the heart of a father and a zeal for Christian education which seemed to rival his own, he took advantage of this to suggest the opening of a new school in one of the thickly populated quarters of the Faubourg Saint Germain which needed such an establishment very badly. The pious pastor, willing to undertake all sorts of good works, satisfied his own zeal by fulfilling the desires of the holy Founder. This new school, which De La Salle had been projecting for some time, was set up in the neighborhood of the hospital for the incurables, in the rue Saint Placide. It is still there today. As soon as the new school opened its doors, so many students flocked in that the four Brothers assigned there were overwhelmed with work. It became necessary to send two more to help them out. In this way, the parish of Saint Sulpice in Paris, which is bigger and more densely populated than some of the larger cities of the kingdom, was divided into three sections where the Brothers taught school (and still do), thanks to the liberality of the parish priests.

It is only right to call attention here to the enthusiasm that these saintly pastors showed for Christian education. It seems that this zeal

was conferred on them when they were appointed to this position and that they vied with each other in protecting such an excellent work. De La Barmondière, the solicitous pastor who died in the odor of sanctity in 1694, was the one who first called the Brothers to his parish to run the Gratuitous Schools. His successors, all of whom were men of remarkable merit and uncommon piety, far from neglecting the Christian education of needy youth, distinguished themselves in promoting it, and it seems that the most recent parish priest deserved credit for surpassing his predecessors in heaping benefits and proofs of his goodness on the new Institute.

Let us now return to our story.

This multitude of pupils who flocked into the Christian and Gratuitous Schools left those of the paid schoolmasters empty. This once again provoked alarm among the Paris schoolmasters. As on the two prior occasions, they felt that physical assault was the shortest and easiest way of closing down the new school. Fearing lest they might not be able to secure the verdict they wanted, they decided to seize it for themselves and proceeded to lay their hands on everything used by the Brothers and the students in the school on rue Saint Placide, just as they had done a few years earlier in that of rue du Bac.

De La Salle happened to arrive on the scene just when this vandalism was in progress, and seeing that they were making off with whatever they had laid hands on, he said to his charitable rivals with his usual tranquil air, *Here, take me along, too!* "We have no quarrel with you," they told him, "but with these Brothers." In fact, the Brothers were summoned to court, and during the three months that the lawsuit lasted, the Gratuitous Schools remained shut. During this interval, the zealous Superior fell ill, but his illness did not lead to any complications. Because Divine Providence had destined him to be the advocate as well as the Founder of the Christian Schools, God gave him back his health in order that he might once more plead before earthly magistrates in favor of the public and of poor children. De La Chétardie took the cause of the Gratuitous Schools to heart as much as De La Salle did, and it was by his order and on his advice that the zealous Founder undertook to fight the case.

The Brothers appeared when summoned, accompanied by their Superior. He very adroitly seized a favorable moment to speak when a pause had intervened in the proceedings, so that they could not refuse him the favor of showing how his rights were being violated. He pleaded his own case, therefore, in which nothing but his charity made him an interested party. He did this with so much wisdom and with such cogent reasons that he won the judge over to his side, so to

speak, prompting him to interrogate the schoolmasters, which covered them with confusion and won the case for the Brothers.

To make clear the reason why the judge undertook this interrogation on the side of the Brothers, it must be said that the schoolmasters had based their claim on a misrepresentation. Knowing that the cause of the Gratuitous Schools was the cause of the public and that it concerned the interests of the poor, recalling that they had once before challenged and been shamefully defeated, the schoolmasters knew that their plea would once again be turned down by the court if they showed themselves to be the enemies and aggressors of the needy. At the same time, they were sure of winning if they could convince the court that the Brothers were financially as interested as they themselves were and that the Brothers likewise profited by their teaching. If the judge were to believe this calumny, the Brothers' case would take on a quite different appearance for him. It would no longer have been a question of the public interest or that of the poor, and deserving of no special favor, the Brothers would have been condemned to pay the costs of the lawsuit and enjoined from interfering with other people's rights and livelihood. So the entire weight of the charitable advocate's discourse rested on the gratuity of the Christian Schools.

Monsieur de La Salle had left everything to establish these schools. He had resigned his canonry and given away his fortune, and this disinterestedness inspired him with genuine eloquence and lent him a convincing tone. But the prudent Superior knew that the judge was hesitating between an affirmative and a negative decision. With equal confidence, each party was expecting a favorable judgment. (As we know, a bold-faced liar can sometimes reduce a defender of truth to silence.)

De La Salle also realized that the magistrate might leave the matter in suspense, if truth did not immediately prevail over falsehood. So he dared the schoolmasters to bring forward the slightest proof that what they said was true. He declared himself ready to admit defeat and to close all of the Brothers' schools if his rivals could demonstrate that they were not gratuitous. This challenge disconcerted the masters and naturally prompted the judge to ask them the obvious question. When they could not reply, he gave judgment in the only way possible: against the accusers. For when he demanded that the schoolmasters show proof that the Brothers, like themselves, sold the services they rendered to the young, they had to keep silent and withdraw in shame. By abandoning their complaint, they obliged the judge to condemn them.

De La Salle recognized the hand of God in this whole affair and considered the happy issue thereof as a singular favor from the divine bounty. This is what he himself said about it in a letter he wrote to a Brother in a community outside Paris. Among other things, he informed him that God seemed to have given him back his health only to bring a favorable conclusion to the lawsuit which had ended to the advantage of the Christian Schools.

Delivered once again from unjust pursuit by their rivals, the schools quickly resumed their forward march and once more began producing the abundant and evident good results they had previously afforded. The Lord's blessing flowed out on them as soon as they reopened, and from that time to this, they have never known decline. Order and discipline are maintained in them, and the effects of the Christian instruction and education they impart are notable in the lives of the students.

As no one was more interested in all this than the pastor of Saint Sulpice, no one else appeared happier over it. His pleasure was to go to visit the schools, to inquire about the progress made by the students, and to encourage them by distributing small prizes. He made these visits regularly every month, accompanied by Madame Voisin, who brought him along with her in her carriage. Each visit afforded him new satisfaction. Laden with rewards when he arrived, he left behind him proofs of his liberality; he spread joy and noble emulation among the children, whom he urged to come to school regularly and to distinguish themselves there by their modest behavior.

On one occasion, De La Salle, knowing that De La Chétardie and Madame Voisin were going to come for their usual visit to the school in rue Saint Placide, made it a point to be there to welcome them. Seeing the large number of children (there were over 400 of them) who filled the classrooms, De La Chétardie could not restrain his joy; addressing the one responsible for all this good work, he said to him, *Ah, Monsieur! What a work! Where would this multitude of children be, if they were not gathered here? They would be running the streets, fighting, and learning to their cost the ways of sin and evil!* In the presence of Madame Voisin, he questioned the children on the mysteries of our holy religion. Delighted by their replies, their modesty, and the good order that he witnessed, he embraced the Brothers and gave them the kiss of peace as a sign of his friendship. Going from one class to another with eagerness and a sort of holy curiosity, he thoroughly enjoyed himself and departed only with regret. But he left behind him a new determination: among the students, to study hard and among the Brothers, to instruct their pupils well.

His zeal went even further, and to demonstrate and advertise the good being done in the Christian Schools, he organized on the first Saturday of the month a sort of procession of children from the various classes. The Brothers brought them, lined up two by two, to the parish church to attend a Solemn Mass in honor of Our Lady, after which a portion of blessed bread was distributed to all of them in turn. Madame Voisin bore the cost of this, which amounted to some fifty livres. De La Chétardie's joy knew no bounds when he saw about a thousand children gathered under his eyes, already being instructed and brought up in such an edifying manner, thanks to his charity. He pointed them out to Madame de Montespan, to Madame Voisin, and to the other pious ladies who derived much edification from the spectacle. He mentioned to them what a sort of miracle it was to see the perfect order, modesty, and silence which reigned among these children who were usually considered to be so wild and ungovernable.

In this way, the worthy parish priest of Saint Sulpice showed his affection for the Christian Schools and sustained that of Madame Voisin, which encouraged this pious lady to continue her donations to them. She felt she could do nothing better with her money than to support a work so useful to the public and so necessary for the poor. At the suggestion of the parish priest, she agreed at this particular time when the price of bread had again increased considerably to have a pound of it distributed daily as an alms to all of the Brothers' pupils.

As De La Chétardie's zeal for the Christian Schools grew day by day, he sought to multiply them in his parish as much as he could. In view of this, he caused another one to be opened in rue Fossez de Monsieur le Prince, near the Saint Michel gate. This school, like the others, soon attracted so many pupils that four Brothers had to be assigned to it. It is true that it did not last more than three or four years, because the charity of those who supported it eventually grew cold, and it had to be discontinued. Of course, the Paris schoolmasters were not happy at the opening of this new establishment, but they did not dare cause any trouble. The influence enjoyed by the parish priest of Saint Sulpice, who had declared himself its founder and protector, tied their hands and obliged them to maintain an uneasy truce with the Brothers, even though their hearts were filled with thoughts of strife.

# Chapter XV

*Second attempt to establish a Gratuitous School and a training college for country schoolmasters, in Saint Hippolyte parish in Paris.*

By giving the Founder the opportunity of opening a school in the parish of Saint Hippolyte in the Saint Marcel suburb, Divine Providence also furnished De La Salle with a chance to establish a new training college for country schoolmasters. No other type of institution interested the servant of God as much as this. In the concept he entertained of his Institute, there was a place for the Brothers who would teach in towns and cities and one for lay schoolmasters destined to work in country villages. The first part of his plan was succeeding well enough, in spite of opposition and persecution on the part of the world and of hell, but the second, which he had started in Reims with so much success, had not survived his own departure from that city, and he yearned with a holy longing to revive it. God gave him this joy but not for very long. He witnessed the destruction of this undertaking through the treachery of the one among his sons on whom he counted most and whom he had chosen to preside over its foundation. Here is how all this happened.

The pastor of Saint Hippolyte, learning of all the good done by the Christian Schools in the parish of Saint Sulpice, was inspired to secure the same advantages for his own parish. He found De La Salle quite willing to give him two Brothers, and he provided for their upkeep in a truly generous fashion. When he saw for himself how much benefit could be derived from a Gratuitous School conducted by disinterested and truly pious teachers, he looked even farther afield and conceived the idea of extending to country parishes the blessings that the Lord was bestowing on his own. The pastor broached the idea to De La Salle and asked him how it could be carried out. The wise Superior, determined not to send his Brothers to small villages because of the reasons previously mentioned, made the parish priest understand that it would be possible to replace the Brothers by schoolmasters brought up and trained in virtue and in the art of their profession. Seeing that the parish priest was eager to cooperate with him in founding a training college for these country schoolmasters, he informed him about the project and added that he was impatiently awaiting the day when he would see this important work get under way once more.

The eager pastor, delighted to learn that his idea was feasible and that simple and easy means to realize it were available, resolved to second De La Salle's plan; he entrusted to him the job of establishing the training college while he himself undertook to provide the funds. Never did two men intent on a good work seem more satisfied. De La Salle had found in the pastor of Saint Hippolyte the man he had been hoping to meet, the man who would resurrect in Paris the training school for country schoolmasters which had failed in Reims, and the parish priest of Saint Hippolyte found in De La Salle the right man to carry out his desires and satisfy his zealous wishes.

Each one did his part in the undertaking. At the suggestion of the pious pastor, a certain gentleman gave them a house, and a virtuous ecclesiastic donated an income of 800 livres a year to underwrite the foundation. As soon as the house was ready, De La Salle brought in a number of young candidates from Champagne. To instruct them, he chose one of the pioneer Brothers in whom he had unlimited confidence but who, a few years later, turned into a new Judas. This same building also accommodated the classes of the parish school; the second Brother taught one of these, while the other one was conducted by the apprentice schoolmasters under the eyes of their director. The young men, in turn, practiced teaching in order to learn the methods of handling a class effectively.

The Brothers' manner of living and most of their regulations were followed in this training college. The students rose at 4:30 A.M. and went to bed at 9 P.M. Interior prayer, spiritual reading, and examination of conscience alternated during the day with the exercises proper to their profession: reading, writing, and arithmetic. These subjects, along with Gregorian chant, were taught at specified times. Silence and recollection were observed, as well as other practices of piety in use among the Brothers. Each young man wore the clothes he had brought with him on entering, all of them dressing in secular garb. Moreover, they were provided with board, lodging, and instruction gratis; goodwill was all that was asked of them.

This training college flourished for as long as the parish priest lived, some five or six years, but his death brought about its ruin on account of the very means he had taken to provide for its survival, so true is the observation of the Wise Man, who says that *human perspectives are short* and his wisdom, as well as his precautions, are most uncertain. On his deathbed, the pious parish priest of Saint Hippolyte, realizing better than ever the importance of this good work he had helped establish, had no greater concern than to insure its continuation after his own demise. Since the institution was not legally

recognized and enjoyed no official status, he had to find a way to make sure that it was provided with funds. After considering the matter carefully, he thought he could solve all the difficulties by naming the Brother who directed the college as heir to the invested capital that supported the institution. The worthy parish priest had no doubts about this Brother's honesty. Indeed, it could scarcely be questioned. He was one of the two men whom the Founder considered as his two arms and whom he had selected as the pillars of his Community. Together with De La Salle and Brother Gabriel Drolin, this Brother constituted the triumvirate who had obliged themselves by vow never to abandon the Institute and to labor with all their strength for its progress, until death, as we have related above.

De La Salle had so much confidence in him that he had chosen this Brother to be the Director of the new training college. It would seem, therefore, that the pastor of Saint Hippolyte could not have acted more prudently than in making this Brother his heir. We could not have imagined that this man, aware of his true wishes and chosen to execute his projects, would abuse this confidence and appropriate for himself the funds given him for the training college for country schoolmasters. The Brother could surely not have been ignorant of the intentions of the parish priest, since the latter had personally told him of them. Yet the funeral of the pastor was hardly over when De La Salle found out that he had chosen a Judas in the man he had appointed as superior of this institution and that this wretched Brother, like the perfidious Apostle, intended to enrich himself with money given to God and destined for the support of a good work.

## The Brother responsible for the ruin of the training college

When the vigilant Superior learned of the death of the pastor and of the dispositions set up by his will, he came to make arrangements with the Brother. But he got a rude shock when he found his principal disciple ready to turn his back on him and tell him superciliously that he no longer recognized him, could do very well without him, and, in a word, wished to have nothing more to do with him. The avaricious man, elated over his good fortune, was determined to make the most of it. He claimed that the will had been made out in his favor and that the money belonged to him alone.

On this occasion, De La Salle's eminent virtue appeared in all its splendor. His disciple's perfidious conduct was obvious; his ingratitude, notorious; his injustice, crying; his insolence, outrageous. They only served, however, as shadows which brought out in bolder relief

the mildness, humility, and disinterestedness of the servant of God. De La Salle accepted the unjust and insulting greeting of the Brother in humble silence and did not allow himself to complain in the least. Happy over such a turn of events which made him resemble Jesus Christ betrayed by one of his disciples, he felt chagrin only over the ruin of the training college which he had so long hoped to see flourish again. If no man had ever imitated Judas more closely in his perfidious and avaricious conduct than this unfortunate Brother, never did anyone better imitate Jesus in his meekness and patience than did De La Salle on this occasion. He came home in peace and seemed to forget about the wrong done to him. He never dreamed of vindicating his rights in the matter of the training college for which the legacy had been destined.

As abyss calls to abyss, as those who fall from the loftiest positions are the most seriously hurt, the ambitious Brother did not limit himself to this first offense. He laid aside his habit and put the other Brother, his companion, out of the house. He secured release from his vows and thought only of enjoying in peace the goods he had unjustly stolen from the Church. The charitable ecclesiastic who had joined the deceased parish priest in supporting the good work and who, at the latter's request, had agreed to make over to it an income of 800 livres per year was outraged at the unjust use made of the funds left by the former parish priest, and he revoked his own donation. Thus the training college which had been started so quickly and successfully fell into complete ruin, to the great regret of the servant of God, who was powerless to prevent its destruction.

The sacrilegious usurper did continue the school established in the parish. Sometime later, however, either because he had wasted most of the legacy he had appropriated or because he hoped to appease the remorse of his conscience which tormented him, he sought to be readmitted into the Community from which he had separated himself with so much shame and scandal. Like a good father, De La Salle opened his arms to this prodigal and unnatural son. He would have taken him back into the Society with joy, but the advice of wise and prudent people who feared the effects such a pernicious example might cause dissuaded him from doing so.

This was the second wound De La Salle received since moving into the new house. We shall soon speak of the first one, which, although it preceded the second, also followed it. It is easy to understand how much the servant of God suffered on account of the callous behavior of the Brother of whom we have spoken. Our heart can sympathize with the pangs caused by ingratitude, perfidy, cruelty,

injustice, insolence, and meanness more easily than our lips can express that feeling. Nonetheless, a pure soul suffers less from the consequences of these vices than from the ruin of an important establishment destined for the glory of God and the salvation of souls. But the time had not yet come for the Superior of the Brothers to start counting his crosses.

The ones we have spoken of were only the beginning of his sorrows. When he moved from the small house to the larger one, he found bigger crosses awaiting him. Although his Institute achieved important progress there, it was also there that he saw his troubles multiply. The ground on which he walked produced nothing but thorns and brambles for him. He was to encounter new persecutions at every step, and these would leave him only when he departed from this life. This new Job faced these most trying happenings with a confident and tranquil air which amazed those who shared his confidence. Ever the same, he sought comfort in his complete submission to the orders of Divine Providence and in total abandonment to God's action.

The perfidious disciple of whom we have spoken survived his master but not for long. After continuing the school in the parish of Saint Hippolyte for over twenty years, he fell ill of a mortal ailment the day after De La Salle expired. The servant of God died on Good Friday, 7 April 1719. It seems that on the very next day, he interested heaven in avenging a crime which he had so wholeheartedly pardoned during his life. The former Brother fell ill on Holy Saturday, the day the servant of God was buried, and after five months of suffering, he went to give an account to his Judge for the tremendous injustice he had been guilty of toward the Church, for the affront he had offered his Superior, for his scandalous desertion which had shocked his Community, and for the complete ruin which he had brought to the training college for country schoolmasters.

## De La Salle accepts fifty young Irish exiles into the house

It was about this same time that De La Salle opened his house to fifty young Irish lads who had recently taken refuge in France in order to preserve their religion. This project had been proposed to him by the parish priest of Saint Sulpice, acting on the suggestion of the archbishop. The prelate had been asked by the king of England, who had taken refuge in this kingdom, to find a suitable place for the group of young men who had voluntarily left their country to safeguard their faith from persecution. Archbishop de Noailles found no more fitting

solution than to send them to the Community of the Brothers, where their piety might be nourished and the innocence of their hearts, even more threatened than their faith, might be preserved from the corruption of the world.

The archbishop had not yet been prejudiced against the former canon of Reims, nor had there been erased from his mind the intimations of holiness based on reports of heroic virtues that came to him while he was still bishop of Châlons. He loved and honored the servant of God as an apostolic man, and on this occasion, he wished to give him a striking proof of his trust by confiding to him the education of a group of fervent Catholic young men whom His Britannic Majesty had entrusted to him. In doing this, the prelate showed great consideration which he was not, strictly speaking, bound to do, since as the first superior of the diocese, he could of his own accord have opened to these young Irishmen the doors of a community which was entirely subject to him. Because he preferred to request as a favor what he could have required by an order, he sought the agreement of the Superior of the Brothers for something which he could have demanded.

De La Salle strove to correspond with the trust that the prelate showed him. Out of obedience to his superior and out of charity toward these pious refugees, he provided them lodging and let them occupy his house. Not relying exclusively on the vigilance of the Brother whom he placed in charge of them, he himself took a special interest in their education. In this way, they were soon in a position to fulfill honorably the various responsibilities for which they were destined.

While these young men, so staunchly Catholic and so deeply attached to the Roman Church, were being educated in this school of virtue, the king of England, accompanied by the cardinal, honored them by paying them a visit. This great prince, a victim for his religion, had sacrificed his throne to be loyal to his faith. He showed himself extremely concerned about the education of these youths who had suffered persecution on his account.

Everyone knows—it is hardly necessary to mention here—that the great revolution that had taken place in England several years prior to the persecution we are speaking of was a result of the zeal that this worthy king had shown for the Catholic faith. With the queen, his spouse, and their son, the Prince of Wales, he was forced to flee before the tyrant who had pursued the path of crime even to the throne itself. They had sought shelter in France and the protection of Louis XIV, the zealous defender of their rights and of their faith. The loyal

subjects who had followed the royal couple into exile and who had been welcomed in a kingdom which had just recently freed itself from the heresy which had wrought such carnage within it[12] had given the example to those whom they had left behind in their country, exposed to the fury of persecution, and encouraged them to come in their turn to seek their safety and security in France.

Since zeal for the Catholic religion was the only reason for the fall of the king and queen of Great Britain, the usurper of their crown constantly strove to extirpate the faith from the country. The tyrant knew full well that the rightful king still had a large number of faithful adherents in the kingdom he had been forced to abandon, and he realized that their attachment to the true religion kept them firmly bound to their legitimate sovereign. He felt that the best way of overcoming their double fidelity was to make them feel the weight of his murderous arm and to grind down Roman Catholics under his authority. Not ashamed of adding to the odious title of usurper that of tyrant, he often stirred up the flames of persecution again, and since those who practiced the old faith preferred to abandon their lands and their country rather than give up their religion, they came begging the protection of the most Christian king, who made it an honor and a duty of piety to welcome them into his kingdom.

These faithful subjects whom the sword of persecution had caused to flee their homeland in order to remain with their legitimate prince were very dear to their exiled king. Their cause was his own. He showed a father's concern about everything that affected them and took care of them as though they were his children. He certainly showed this on the occasion we mentioned. Not feeling himself liberated from the responsibility for these Irish youths whom he had recommended to the cardinal and entrusted to his charity, he wished to see with his own eyes the place where they lived, to find out what kind of education they were receiving, and to inquire about everything concerning them. Having seen for himself the Christian manner in which they were being brought up, he was completely satisfied. After showing much courtesy to De La Salle, he expressed his gratitude to him for the trouble he was taking to educate these young men and for the progress they had accomplished.

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12. The reference is to the suppression of Calvinism in France by the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685.

## De La Salle's talent for religious education and conversion

This great gift which the virtuous priest possessed for bringing up youths in a Christian manner and for converting hardened souls drew to him the confidence of the greatest sinners. Parents unable to cope with their unmanageable children, despairing of ever being able to bring them back to the path of duty, sought in him the grace that they could not find in themselves to withdraw these children from their evil ways. He often succeeded beyond their expectations and gave back these wild, ungovernable children—now gentle, docile, submissive, and pious—to those who had entrusted them to him.

The prompt and sudden change in a young ecclesiastic belonging to a noble family, who had been sent to him, seemed to be a sort of miracle to those who had known this young man. In vain had every means imaginable been used to induce him to act reasonably and not to lose sight of the state in life to which he was destined. In vain had his relatives thought that sending him to spend some time in the most regular communities would enable him to pick up a smattering of clerical spirit or at least would make him ashamed of his scandalous and ill-regulated life. He turned all the remedies offered him into poison and by a tragic abuse of these means of salvation, he had made them become additional causes of damnation. Only in the Community of the Brothers did he return to his good sense and his faith, but as we intend to speak of the conversions brought about through the ministry of De La Salle in our fourth book, where we shall treat of his virtues, we shall say no more about this case here.

The holiness of the Superior of the Brothers had become known in Paris; it acquainted people with their Institute and inspired several great bishops with the resolution to call them into their dioceses. The first of these was Paul Godet Desmarets, bishop of Chartres, a prelate whose zeal and piety so often served as a bulwark for sound doctrine. He could be looked upon as the scourge of innovators in his time, one whom they all feared as the most uncompromising enemy they had. He was the first to declare war on false spirituality and to point out clearly the subtle venom and the latest perversity it veiled. He and De La Salle had known each other at the Seminary of Saint Sulpice when De La Salle was a young canon of Reims. Just as they had edified each other then, so they preserved a mutual esteem and consideration later on.

## The bishop of Chartres and the clergy petition for Brothers

The great bishop of Chartres had asked De La Salle for some of his disciples several years before this, but the servant of God, under the plea that at the time he did not have enough of them sufficiently well trained, had begged his friend to wait. Although he had every reason to satisfy a prelate who enjoyed such great credit at court and who, on account of his piety and the purity of his belief, wielded such influence over the king, he felt that he should delay sending him any Brothers until he could see clearly that such was the will of God. Bishop Godet Desmarets had been asking for Brothers since 1694 and had frequently reiterated his request. Finally, in 1699, he insisted so strongly that De La Salle could no longer hold back. Before promising to send any of his subjects to Chartres, the humble Superior wished, however, to obtain the consent of the Brothers. So he called them together and informed them of the illustrious prelate's proposal, and after praising the latter's eminent piety and ardent zeal for religion, he let them come to their own decision as they pleased. The Brothers, conscious of the honor paid to them by a bishop whom the partisans of sound traditional doctrine honored as the shield of the faith in France, vied with one another in offering themselves to their Superior for this mission.

Eventually the pious prelate had the satisfaction of seeing all the parish priests in the city of Chartres, without exception, join him in carrying out his design. These zealous pastors, learning that their bishop was trying to secure for Chartres a group of capable and exemplary schoolmasters, unanimously begged him to bring his project to completion as soon as possible. They were so well satisfied with the teachers he had obtained for their parish schools for girls that they ardently desired a similar provision for the boys. The fear that this project might not come about at all or might be long delayed led them to address to the bishop a petition signed by all the parish priests, urging him to conclude the matter speedily. In their petition, these priests speak like experienced, vigilant, and zealous pastors who realize that they are bound to labor for the instruction and sanctification of their parishioners and who recognize that the worst evils afflicting their flocks arise from the lack of a suitable education for the young. Therefore the remedy must be sought in securing for them knowledgeable, pious, and disinterested teachers.

After discussing this matter among themselves several times, they continue in their petition, "We have come to the conclusion that one of the main causes of the indocility, immodesty, ignorance, and the

obviously disorderly lives led by the majority of the children in this city, both boys and girls, is the fact that either there are no Gratuitous Schools for the poor or the schoolmasters and mistresses who up to now have conducted these schools have done so without proper authorization and without the knowledge of the ecclesiastical authorities. In their work, they have no end in view other than earning a livelihood; hence, they do not fulfill their tasks for the good of the children. They lack aptitude, zeal, and constancy. It is necessary to find a remedy for so great an evil, and this means obtaining for this city some schoolmasters and mistresses, established by Your Excellency, whose professional qualifications, piety, and zeal will be well vouched for, so that they may educate the young. In particular, some Gratuitous Schools should be set up for the benefit of the poor children, who because they cannot pay the fees required by the schoolmasters and mistresses, remain without instruction, do not frequent the schools, run wild, and so are easily perverted and become incorrigible.

"We have learned that there is in Paris a priest of great piety who has undertaken to prepare and train young men who possess all the qualities needed to carry out this task properly. This priest is willing to send his subjects wherever they are asked for, provided that their upkeep and livelihood are guaranteed, which requires only a modest sum. We feel obliged to have recourse to Your Excellency, humbly begging you to use all your influence and your charitable alms to secure for this city such a powerful agent for the reform of the morals of the people."

The bishop of Chartres, delighted to see that his own zeal was seconded by that of the parish priests of his episcopal city, urged the Superior to give him some of his Brothers. Six were sent to teach in the Gratuitous Schools and a seventh to take charge of the material concerns of the community. The virtuous prelate received them with great joy. Forgetting who he was, he displayed great friendliness toward them and gave them all sorts of proofs of truly Christian charity. This bishop was not one of those men who never get off their pedestals and who wish never to be seen except arrayed in all their dignity. He was of easy access, and by his character as well as through virtue, he liked to show himself approachable even to the humblest people and make them feel that in their bishop they had a brother and a father.

As enlightened as he was zealous and being no less wise than pious, the prelate took all the steps necessary to make the ministry of the Brothers effective among the young. The outright protection with which he favored the Brothers, the generous provision he made out

of his own purse for their upkeep, and the petition forwarded to him by the parish priests of the city urging him to bring the Brothers to Chartres were all strong reasons that led the faithful to entrust the education and instruction of their children to these new spiritual guides whom the goodness of God was sending them. All that remained was for the bishop to authorize by a pastoral letter the opening of the Christian and Gratuitous Schools. This he did on 4 October 1699. In this pastoral letter, the pious bishop, with his customary unction, declared that ever since it had pleased God to entrust to him the government of the diocese, he had nothing more at heart than the establishment of Christian Schools, especially Charity Schools, in the parishes which needed them most. He added:

"Nothing seemed to us better calculated to inspire the people confided to our care with a knowledge of the Gospel maxims which should regulate their conduct. Sad experience has taught us that the moral turpitude which has invaded all ranks of society results from the little care taken to provide the faithful during their youthful years with an education worthy of their status as children of God, a status given to them in baptism. We felt that in doing this, we would considerably facilitate the task of fathers and mothers, who are strictly bound to bring up their children in a Christian manner, yet who are often unable to do it successfully, prevented as they are by their occupations and their daily labor or because they themselves lack the qualities needed to succeed in this task.

"Think seriously of the weighty words of Saint Paul, that *mothers* (one should say the same thing, with even greater reason, of fathers) *will not be saved except by giving their children a good education*, which means acting in such a way that they may preserve their faith, grow in charity and holiness, and lead well-regulated lives. Our own experience in governing souls has convinced us more firmly than ever of the truth of these words of one of the greatest churchmen of these last centuries, a man who, despite the eminence of his learning, gladly spent the declining years of his life teaching religion to children: *I do not know whether there is anything nobler and more agreeable to God than to cultivate these young plants in the Lord's garden and to water them with the salutary waters of heavenly doctrine.*[13]

"We have observed—and we were much consoled in doing so—that God was beginning to pour out abundant blessings on the Charity Schools which we had established for girls in certain parishes of the city. This confirmed us in our desire to extend this favor to other

13. Jean Gerson.

places and to procure similar advantages for boys. What encouraged us even more in this undertaking was to see that our king—always great in everything he undertakes but never more so than in what relates to religion—was extending his solicitude to the establishment and the multiplication of schools and, inspired by piety, was striving to arouse the zeal and vigilance of pastors in this matter. To second his pious intentions, we have brought here some teachers, very well trained for such a noble task and capable of edifying the children by their example as well as of instructing them through imparting the necessary lessons." After this, he set the opening of the schools for 12 October of that same year, 1699.

The pastoral letter had all the effect that its author could have hoped for. Docile to the voice of their chief pastor, parents hastened to send their children to the Charity Schools, which were soon filled. The great good produced by the Christian education of these youngsters, heretofore left to themselves, was a source of deep joy for Bishop Godet Desmarets, who provided for the schools with a generosity worthy of his great heart. He saw to it that nothing was lacking to them. Fearing lest concern for the necessities of life should distract the Brothers from their ministry which was so useful to the public or lest worrying about their needs should impair their zeal, he took care to provide for everything. It was only after his death that the Brothers realized how much good he had done for them and how deeply indebted they were to him. When they lost him, years of famine followed the years of abundance, and their charitable labors were rewarded by persecutions, as we shall see farther on.

The prelate's generosity toward the Brothers was linked to an admirable zeal for the success of their schools. His humility led him to visit them and caused him to take pleasure in doing so frequently. He seemed to consider this one of his pastoral duties; he carried it out with noble familiarity and majestic simplicity. He showed the children a father's interest and spoke to them with a mother's tenderness. It would be hard to say who remained most charmed, who felt most strongly the pleasure of his visits, the Brothers or the students. He exhorted the students, consoled the Brothers, and urged all to persevere in their good work. The unction of his words left the bountiful radiance of Jesus Christ and the seeds of virtue behind him wherever he went. Above all, he neglected nothing that could sustain the Brothers in the difficult beginnings, and he spared nothing to restore their health when they began to suffer from exhaustion.

On this score, the bishop had frequent opportunities to display his charity, because the zeal which devoured these fervent Brothers

for the instruction of the young and the effort of their constant application to their classwork, joined to the exercises of a severe interior life and often to the exaggerated practices of mortification and penance common among them, ruined the health of several of the most robust. Some of them died, blessing God for having led them to so holy a profession. The charitable bishop, deeply disturbed over the loss of some of his best schoolteachers, spared nothing to re-establish or to preserve the health of the remaining ones. As he was convinced that their excessive fervor was the principal threat to this, he begged and implored them with all kindness to confine themselves within the limits of prudence.

Although he himself was no enemy to penance and was a zealous promoter of evangelical austerity, as we can see from the admirable pastoral letter he wrote against the false spirituality in vogue at the time, he warned the Brothers to restrain their fervor so that it might last longer and to wait for God's own good time to offer the sacrifice of their lives, without trying to anticipate God's decrees. He told them that if they did not wish to fatten the victim before immolating it, they should at least nourish it and not overburden it with excessive work and an unbearable load of austerity. He reminded them that Christian instruction and the proper education of poor children were the end of their vocation and the source of their merits for heaven; hence, they should tailor their penances to the requirements of the work that this vocation demanded of them and subordinate the one to the other. After all, the fatigue induced by teaching was in itself a considerable mortification which should be preferred to all others; it cannot countenance what conflicts with itself.

The good prelate did all he could to bring relief to these sick Brothers. He did not disdain to visit them, to examine their spiritual books, to hunt out their instruments of penance, and to take away those that in their fervor they might have made indiscreet use of. So much condescension on the part of a prelate so distinguished by his merit sprang from that basic goodness of heart and charity which characterized him, from the ardent zeal he had for the Christian Schools, and from the singular veneration he entertained for their Founder. On his side, De La Salle omitted nothing to demonstrate his gratitude toward the bishop. In Bishop Godet Desmarets, he honored a true successor of the Apostles, one who was even dearer to him by reason of the purity of his faith and his morals, his zeal for sound doctrine, and his horror of all profane innovations than because of the protection extended to his disciples.

## The bishop forces De La Salle to stay for dinner

When the servant of God, during the visits which his vigilance obliged him to make to Chartres to inspect the Brothers' community and the schools, went to present his respects to the pious bishop, he was received by him like an angel from God or like a former fellow student at the Seminary of Saint Sulpice, with that cordiality and holy familiarity which great souls, even in the exalted dignities they attain, never fail to show toward their old friends. The good prelate invariably invited the virtuous priest to dine with him, but in vain did he exhaust all his most engaging manners to induce him to stay.

Finally, weary of inviting a man who always took refuge behind the Rule established in his Community of never eating outside the house except when travelling, he decided one day to obtain through a pious subterfuge what he could not win through appeals to friendship. The servant of God, without suspecting the innocent trap into which he was walking, had not failed on his arrival at Chartres to go, as usual, to the episcopal palace to pay his respects to the bishop. He found all the doors open when he wished to enter but discovered that they were all shut tight, by the orders of His Excellency, when he wanted to leave. So, finding himself a prisoner, he learned that the sentence the bishop had imposed on him was to dine at his table, and thus he had to pay the penalty before he would be delivered. In this way, he finally yielded to the prelate's insistence.

After the meal, the bishop of Chartres and Monsieur d'Aubigné, then his vicar-general, who later became bishop of Noyon and finally archbishop of Rouen, discussed in detail with the servant of God everything relating to the Brothers' Institute and tried to bring him to mitigate the manner of living followed in it and to treat himself with less rigor. Observing his simplicity, his penance, and the extreme poverty to which he had condemned himself, they combatted in him virtues which in their hearts they admired. These distinguished men thought that the virtuous priest carried the practice of austerity too far and that the labor of the classroom, added to such a hard and mortified life, would undermine even the strongest constitutions.

With this in mind and to bring him to moderate his own fervor and to place a limit on that of his disciples, they told him everything that friendship could suggest. But a man who never thought he was doing enough for God looked upon these charitable remonstrances only as reasons for greater confusion and as tacit incitements to imitate Jesus Christ more closely. Finally, he became a sort of spectacle to this group of friends, who examined him from head to toe; nothing in

him escaped the censure or the reproaches of these charitable hosts. Some chided him for the poverty of his clothes; others, for their unusual style; some found fault with his thick-soled, clumsy shoes; others, with the shape of his wide-brimmed hat; all of them criticized a man whom they accused of exaggerating in virtue and joined in exhorting him to keep to the common mean.

In this opposition to his garb, the poverty of his mantle was what struck these gentlemen the most, because not only was it made of the coarsest material but also it was so old and worn that it was fit only to be thrown away. This caused the charitable bishop to have another one made for him, but so that it might be to his liking and that he might not refuse it, he had it cut out of very common and cheap cloth. Since this gift was a true alms, the holy priest accepted it with good grace, humility, and gratitude. This mantle, however, did not remain his to use for very long, because sometime later, a couple of highwaymen stole it from him one night when he was returning from Paris to where he was then staying. He surrendered it to them with the same willingness with which he had received it; as he had accepted it from charity, so now he gave it to them through charity.

The most outstanding and visible change that the Gratuitous Schools brought about in the children at Chartres was an extraordinary modesty in church. Like young saplings which because of their youth bend easily when a charitable and skillful hand inclines them, to the astonishment of the entire city, they finally adopted the attitudes that the Brothers wished them to take and conformed to the example of piety they could see in their teachers. The sight of the Brothers leading them in a humble and recollected posture impressed them even more than the lessons they had heard. Observing the Brothers as they entered the house of God, they learned from their silence and their devout exterior how to behave in the same way, and witnessing the piety with which their teachers attended the Divine Office or holy Mass, they felt ashamed for never having assisted thereat up to then in heart and mind and for having been present only in body. The children were finally persuaded on this score and, in their turn, became silent preachers of devotion and of that respectful awe which should seize every faithful Christian at his first step into God's temple.

Bishop Godet Desmarets was so delighted over such an edifying change in the young people brought up in the Christian Schools that he conceived a great desire of profiting by this situation to reform the entire city on a rather important point. For a long time, he had been bewailing the profanations too common in the Lord's house; he had

witnessed how little faith and religious spirit the people showed in so holy a place which they should have entered only with the deepest reverence. However, he did not know what barrier he could oppose to the flood of impiety which showed itself brazenly in the very presence of Jesus Christ. In Chartres, as everywhere else, the worthy prelate could see with sorrow the churches profaned by laughter, conversations, displays of worldly vanity, and a thousand other disorders which constitute the abomination of desolation in the holy place; yet he did not know how he could prevent these sins which were drawing down God's malediction on his people.

Finally, after thinking the matter over carefully, he decided on a course of action. Convinced that if the people could witness the religious respect that the Brothers displayed in church, their example would have on the citizens of Chartres the same effect that it had produced on their students, he resolved to send them on Sundays and feasts to all the parishes of the city. This idea, although a holy and praiseworthy one, did not correspond with the end of the Institute, nor did it sufficiently safeguard the Brothers' own spiritual good. That was why their wise Superior could not go along with this plan. He also had another difficulty with the bishop of Chartres: the question of teaching reading in Latin.

## Reasons for not using Latin to teach reading

The established practice in the Christian Schools is to begin by teaching children how to read French before teaching them to read Latin. This unaccustomed procedure did not seem to Bishop Godet Desmarets the most natural one; he wished to have it changed. De La Salle, who had introduced this modification in what was commonly practiced only because he had serious reasons for doing so, asked to be allowed to explain them and proceeded to justify the practice by such cogent arguments that the prelate agreed with him. Here, in substance, are his arguments:

"1) Knowing how to read French is far more useful to all children than knowing how to read Latin.

"2) Since French is their native language, it is incomparably easier for them to learn how to read it than to read Latin, given that they know the one and do not know the other.

"3) Consequently, it takes far less time to teach children to read French than to teach them to read Latin.

"4) Ability to read French facilitates learning how to read Latin; the reverse is not true, as experience shows. The reason for this is

that to read Latin properly, all one needs to do is to articulate each syllable and enunciate each word correctly. This is easy when the child knows how to spell and to read French; it follows that anyone who knows how to read French well can easily learn to read Latin; on the contrary, when much time has been spent learning to read Latin first, still more is required to learn how to read French.

"5) Why does it take so long to learn to read Latin? As already mentioned, Latin words are just sounds to people who do not understand them; hence, it is difficult for them not to omit some of the syllables or to spell out words whose meaning escapes them.

"6) Why should people learn to read Latin, when they will never make any use of this language during their lives? What use do the children of either sex who come to the Christian Schools have for the Latin language? Nuns who must recite the Divine Office in Latin need to know how to read it well, but of a hundred girls who frequent the Gratuitous Schools, scarcely one might become a choir nun in a monastery. So, too, of a hundred boys in the Brothers' schools, how many will later on wish to study the Latin language? Even if there were several of them, should they be favored at the expense of the rest?

"7) Experience shows that those children who frequent the Christian Schools do not stay there very long; they do not attend classes long enough to learn how to read both Latin and French well. As soon as they are old enough to start working, their parents withdraw them or else they stop coming because they have to earn a living. Under these circumstances, if we start by teaching them how to read Latin, the following inconveniences will result: they will quit school before learning how to read French or at least to read it well; when they leave, they will know how to read Latin only imperfectly; in a short time, they will have forgotten what they learned, with the result that they will never really know how to read at all, either French or Latin.

"8) The most serious drawback is that they almost never learn Christian doctrine. In fact, when children begin by learning to read French, they know how to read fairly well by the time they leave school. Knowing how to read easily, they can learn Christian doctrine by themselves and can study it in the printed catechisms; they can sanctify Sundays and feasts by reading good books and reciting well-written prayers in French. Whereas when they leave the Christian and Gratuitous Schools, if they know how to read Latin only, and that badly, all their lives they will remain ignorant of their duties as Christians.

"9) Finally, experience shows that those who do not understand Latin, who have not pursued further studies and acquired familiarity

with the Latin tongue—especially the common people and, a fortiori, the poor who come to the Christian Schools—never succeed in reading Latin well and make fools of themselves when they try to read it in the hearing of those who understand that language. It is, therefore, completely useless to waste time teaching people to read a language which they will never use."

It has been thought proper to summarize these arguments so as to silence the critics who object that in the Gratuitous Schools, the children are taught to read French before learning to read Latin, contrary to the prevailing custom. It is to be hoped that those who find fault with this procedure will pay attention to the reasons which justify it; then they will be the first to recommend this method.

## Difficulties following the death of Bishop Desmarets

The illustrious Bishop Paul Desmarets did not live long enough to benefit the Christian Schools as he would have wished to do. His death, so deeply deplored by the defenders of traditional doctrine, robbed the Brothers of a true father and a powerful defender of their Institute and deprived De La Salle of a faithful friend. The zealous prelate would have done all that he could have in favor of the Gratuitous Schools if, before his death, he had created an endowment to establish them permanently in Chartres, as several other great bishops have done. Without any financial support to fall back on, the Brothers whom he had generously cared for during his lifetime were left in the direst misery. The Christian Schools, lacking any fixed revenue, have often been in desperate straits in a city where they found enemies among the very persons who everywhere else showed themselves to be their defenders. Since nobody was providing for these men whose ministry was wholly gratuitous, it would have been natural for their zealous Superior to withdraw them from a city which seemed to think it was doing them a favor by not expelling them.

But that holy man, whose actions were inspired only by the sublime principles of heavenly wisdom, paid no attention to the prompting of nature or to the reasons for dissatisfaction that the world gave him. On the contrary, the places where his disciples had to suffer the most and where they were most neglected were the places to which he grew most strongly attached, convinced that the cross is what characterizes God's works as well as God's elect and that there is always much good to be done in localities where there is much to suffer. This man who was led only by the maxims of the saints felt that the institutions which have to struggle hardest are those which eventually

receive the greatest blessings from almighty God and that when creatures fail us, we have the most to hope for from heaven. He had taken for his motto that *there is more grace where there is less nature*; he felt that the foundations against which the devil arouses the most furious persecutions are those which prove most useful for souls and give most glory to God.

In accordance with these principles, he preferred to let his disciples remain a prey to the direst poverty rather than to withdraw them from Chartres. However, necessity obliged him to reduce their number from seven to four while waiting for Divine Providence to change the attitude of the city's inhabitants toward the Brothers, a city which is placed under the special protection of the Most Blessed Virgin and where true and profound religious spirit and genuine piety can be found. The great devotion to the Mother of God which distinguishes the city of Chartres and makes it so illustrious in the kingdom was one of the reasons that kept the Brothers there. Reluctant to leave a city so favored by the Queen of Heaven, they preferred to stay on, even if it meant living in extreme poverty.

As a matter of fact, they still subsist only on a certain quantity of wheat and wine furnished them by the illustrious nephew and successor of Bishop Paul Desmarets and on the rare alms given them by a few pious persons, especially Monsieur de Truchis, today the subchanter, whose zeal for supporting the Christian Schools is worthy of a man filled with the spirit of the Seminary of Saint Sulpice, where he was educated. This pious canon, devoted to all sorts of good works and very active in the instruction of the ignorant, within the last few years has obtained the opening of a Brothers' school at Nogent-le-Rotrou, in the diocese of Chartres. We must also acknowledge and honor the piety of His Highness, the Duke d'Orléans, who recently extended his charity to the Gratuitous Schools of Chartres. By granting an annuity of 500 livres, he came to the help of a good work which could no longer survive in that city and made it possible to add a fifth Brother to the four who were already laboring there, like Saint Paul, in hunger and thirst, in cold and nakedness, in poverty and persecutions. It is to be hoped that thanks to the protection of this illustrious prince, the Brothers will not in the future be robbed of the legacies which generous people leave them in their wills and which they now have a right to receive, thanks to the letters patent which His Majesty granted to their motherhouse at Saint Yon near Rouen.[14]

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14. In the original French edition, the paragraph that follows is in italics and is introduced by the word NOTA.

A pious person named Madame Lardé, who had helped the Brothers by her donations during her life, on her death left them by will an annual income of 3,500 livres. But her heirs and the administrators of the poorhouse at Chartres felt themselves justified in using this money for other purposes, on the pretext that the Brothers did not have letters patent for that city. However, the opinion of twenty-seven Parisian lawyers agreed that the letters patent granted to the house of Saint Yon, near Rouen, were valid for all the cities of the kingdom where the Brothers live. But the poor Brothers, although unjustly deprived of their rights, had learned from their Founder, the most disinterested man in the world. They did not lay any claim or start any lawsuit to obtain justice. Still, they did not despair of securing redress some day from those who now refused it to them, once these latter are convinced that natural law, as well as civil law, makes it a duty to follow to the letter the pious dispositions of testators.

It is difficult to understand why people at Chartres and elsewhere convinced themselves that the Brothers might some day shut themselves up in a cloister or become too numerous. What likelihood is there of such a change which would destroy the Institute? It is natural for every being to seek to remain what it is; no entity aspires to its own destruction. Everything tends to its end by a natural inclination.A person is always attached to his first vocation and esteems it more than any other. Consequently, the idea of shutting themselves up in a cloister would have little appeal to the Brothers, for if they did so, they would cease to be what they are; they would destroy their Institute; they would turn their backs on their vocation; they would change their state. Even if they entertained for a moment such a ridiculous temptation, they could not carry it out, because it would be impossible to execute it without losing all the endowments established in favor of the Gratuitous Schools, and if they lost these, the Brothers would have to go to live, not in a cloister but in a poorhouse where they would perish of starvation.

Furthermore, what would they do in a cloister, since they are forbidden by their formal and essential Rules to aspire to Holy Orders and to the priestly ministry, forbidden so strictly, in fact, that they cannot even wear a surplice in church or sing at the lectern? Their constitutions also prohibit them from learning Latin or from using it if they already know it. To imagine that in spite of these fundamental laws of their Institute, the Brothers might some day abandon their profession and prefer a cloistered life to their role as teachers in the Christian Schools is to conjure up ghosts for the pleasure of exorcising them. Still, it is hardly imaginable to what an extent this silly notion

gained currency in the city of Chartres. If it was not the only cause of the court sentence so unfavorable toward the Gratuitous Schools for the poor, it was certainly one of the main ones.

It is well known how violently the masters of the pay schools oppose the establishments of the Brothers, who receive no fees for their services. During the lifetime of Bishop Paul Desmarets, they kept quiet enough; the protection that this great prelate afforded the Brothers whom he employed and whom he himself had called to Chartres successfully foiled their machinations. But his death delivered them from their fear of his authority and afforded them full liberty to declare war on their pious rivals. Unfortunately for the Brothers, who were like defenseless orphans after the death of the bishop who acted as their father, the accusations of their enemies were accepted by the court. The magistrates, along with the mayor and the town councillors, believed that the public good required that the Gratuitous Schools should be emptied but that those where money mattered should be filled!

Thus, by a decree issued in 1717 or 1718, the Brothers were ordered not to receive any longer, without distinction, all the children who came to them, as they had done up to that time, but to take in only those whose names were inscribed in the Register of Paupers and who were, therefore, entitled to public alms. It was also specified that not more than four Brothers should be employed in the Charity Schools and that they should not display a cross above the school door. Other similar prohibitions were enacted, and the court ended by ordering that the said sentence should be read publicly in the parish churches at Mass.

When this sentence, which closed the Christian and Gratuitous Schools in Chartres to all the children of those who were poor but not quite destitute, was read to De La Salle, who was then living at the Seminary of Saint Nicolas du Chardonnet after his return from Marseille, although he was extremely distressed, he could not help both marvelling at a decree which so courteously dismissed the Brothers from the city of Chartres and praising the politeness with which the magistrates discharged those whom they could have expelled in disgrace. But when he came to the conclusion of the document, which prescribed that the sentence be read in the churches at Mass, he suspected some hidden connivance. His first thought was that either the new bishop of Chartres was speaking by the mouth of the judges or that the judges were taking it upon themselves to speak for the bishop. “Such an order,” he told the person who had brought it to him to read, “can come only from the authority of the bishop; it follows that

either the bishop has lent his authority to the magistrates on this point or they have usurped it."

Whatever may be the truth of the second alternative, it is certain that the first was not true. The pious ecclesiastic who was speaking with De La Salle refused to entertain this suspicion, and he convinced him that the nephew of Bishop Paul Desmarets was a worthy successor of his uncle, a prelate who honored the Seminary of Saint Sulpice, where he had been educated, by his rare piety, his ardent zeal for sound doctrine, his austere, mortified, and laborious life, and the practice of the other virtues which make him a bishop worthy of the early days of the Church. He was very far from having lent his authority to a measure which infringed on it and which was so unfavorable to the Christian instruction and education of the children from needy families.

For after all, is it only those whose names appear on the lists of the families who get alms from the poorhouse who can be called truly poor? How many are there who perish in their indigence or languish for a long time in hunger before they turn to public charity? How many secretly put up with all that is most unendurable in poverty and prefer to be its victims, rather than sacrifice their pride by making their needs known? How many workingmen and humble folk trying to raise families are not listed on the charity rolls and do not wish to receive such help, yet do not have the means to purchase for their children the instruction that the Brothers are ready to give them gratis? All such children—the majority—were banished from the Gratuitous Schools by the decree of the court; they found the doors of the pay schools closed to them because of their poverty; thus they grew up in ignorance, in idleness, and ran wild. If the public good requires that they be abandoned to their sad lot and that they remain without the education which they cannot pay for, this is indeed the mystery that De La Salle could not understand; like him, we must leave the riddle to be solved by the wise of this world.

The bishop of Chartres realized full well how seriously his authority had been flouted in this matter and how much the public good suffered by the sentence we have mentioned. So he did not fail to appeal against it to the Parliament of Paris, which early in the following year, on 31 January 1719, issued an injunction against the execution of the said sentence which forbade receiving into the Charity Schools any children whose parents were not inscribed on the Register of the Poverty Bureau.

Because it is a characteristic of perfect charity to grow stronger instead of dying out when it is badly treated, the servant of God

thenceforth seemed even more attached to a city which showed itself so ill-disposed toward his disciples. His charity, in 1705, went so far as to let them be exposed to the contagion of a dread disease which ravaged Chartres and carried off a large number of its citizens, rather than to take them away from the poor children who needed them so much. On this occasion, the pious Founder sacrificed to the public good the lives of four of his principal disciples, whom the epidemic laid low in less than six months, just as it did so many other people. The first was a very virtuous novice. The second was an older Brother, an excellent penman and exceptionally talented teacher, and—what really deserves special praise—a true disciple of De La Salle, filled with his spirit and the grace of his vocation. The third, who had been the Director of Novices, was a man who was hard on himself and much given to severe mortification.[15] The fourth was the infirmarian of the Paris community, whom their tender father had sent to his children to care for them in their illness. But his saintly death, the test of his obedience, was also the reward of his charity.

## Chapter XVI

*Foundation in Calais in 1700.*

The foundation of the Brothers in Calais, which took place shortly after that of Chartres, was entirely different in the circumstances accompanying it and in the measure of success it achieved. When he sent his disciples to the capital of Beausse [Chartres], De La Salle might have said, with Saint Paul, *For a great door has been opened to me to teach Christian doctrine to young children who are poor and abandoned, but I find there a great number of contradictions and adversaries.* By contrast, in Calais De La Salle was expected, impatiently awaited, and welcomed with honor and joy. He could say with the same Apostle *that he had been received there like an angel from heaven and a minister of Jesus Christ.* I am inclined to attribute this fact, on the one hand, to the sort of reluctance and repugnance which the pious Founder felt when he was asked to send his disciples to Chartres and, on the other hand, to the alacrity and satisfaction he showed in sending them to Calais. Perhaps a prophetic spirit or some

15. This is the Director of Novices, who by his imprudent severity had brought about the investigation of the Founder by the archdiocese.

sort of supernatural instinct apprised him of what would happen in those two cities.

As a longtime friend and former fellow student at the Seminary of Saint Sulpice of Bishop Paul Desmarets, it was natural that he should hasten to send some of his followers to a prelate who was so kind, so pious, so highly regarded in France, who was in a position to render such great services to his Institute and who, in fact, offered to do so. The worthy bishop of Chartres had offered De La Salle his influence in obtaining letters patent for the Community, as we shall have occasion to relate later on. Far from seizing such a favorable opportunity, however, the servant of God made the prelate at Chartres wait for several years before sending him any of the Brothers, although, if he did not actually push the matter of the school in Calais, he received the proposal with joy and showed a holy eagerness to carry it out.

This city, almost a frontier city with England—from which it is separated only by a twenty-mile strait—is one where openness, good faith, generosity, and liberality reign. Its inhabitants are characterized by deep religious spirit, piety, and sincere attachment to the Roman Church and to traditional doctrine. It is not surprising, therefore, that Calais drew the attention of De La Salle. He felt attracted to it and seemed to read in the hearts of all its citizens the favorable dispositions they entertained toward the Brothers. Indeed, no locality was more propitious for the establishment of Christian and Gratuitous Schools. The people were good, and the magistrates and upper classes were religiously minded and well disposed. This afforded the holy priest entire liberty to advance the glory of God and, through his disciples, to teach Christian doctrine with ever renewed success and abundant benedictions. This is how the foundation came about.

Toward the end of 1699 or the beginning of 1700, Monsieur Ponthon was a student of theology at the Seminary of the Bons Enfants. One day, happening to stop by the parish church of Saint Sulpice, he was agreeably surprised to see a crowd of children, with a Brother in charge of them, assisting at Mass with a piety not very common among youngsters of that age. The order and discipline which kept these naturally unruly urchins in line, the modesty and reserve shown in the holy place by such a large number of boys, irreverent and disorderly by character or by reason of the lack of seriousness proper to their age, the silence and piety of so many children usually so easily distracted and so inclined to laugh and chatter, and finally, the unusual recollection and the devout air he noted in the Brother, all of which was for him a new and edifying spectacle, struck him very forcibly.

He immediately conceived the desire of providing the same exemplary sight to Calais, where he was the pastor-designate upon the resignation of his uncle, the incumbent.

The younger Ponthon immediately wrote to his uncle, the elder Ponthon, the retiring pastor and dean of the city of Calais, relating to him what he had seen in the church of Saint Sulpice. So arresting was the portrait of the Brothers painted by the younger Ponthon for his uncle, a zealous and pious pastor, that the latter conceived a most ardent desire of having some of them in his parish. Because he feared he might die before seeing them in Calais, his eagerness caused him to write without delay to his nephew, begging him to do everything necessary to obtain for the children of Calais some schoolmasters like the ones he had seen in Paris.

The venerable old man longed for the Brothers' arrival. He wrote letter after letter to his nephew to hasten the conclusion of the affair. Feeling himself on the threshold of eternity, he awaited only the arrival of De La Salle's disciples in order to surrender his soul in peace to God. The consolation he desired before his death, which he begged the Divine Majesty to grant him, was to see the opening of a Christian and Gratuitous School in the city.

Another compelling motive added fuel to this desire and made him urge the prompt execution of the plan. God had just called to eternity the former schoolmaster of the city. His place was vacant, the classes were empty, and the children, lacking a teacher, were wasting their time; idleness exposed all these youngsters to great dangers. Consequently, while necessity urged the opening of the school, the circumstances were favorable for establishing gratuitous classes at this particular time. It was, then, necessary to seize the opportunity and not let it escape. To do so, the uncle wrote his nephew to contact the pious Founder to ask him for some of his disciples and to do everything in order to obtain them. When the younger Ponthon came to ask De La Salle, in his uncle's name, to send some Brothers to Calais, he was received with joy and listened to with pleasure. However, as the servant of God never hurried anything, he took the time needed to carry out all the necessary preliminaries to insure that the foundation would be a stable one.

The former pastor of Calais, who could see the end of his life approaching and who feared to die before the Christian Schools were opened, could not brook delay. Impatient over the inevitable bureaucratic red tape encountered in negotiations of this kind, he wrote letter after letter and got everybody in the city involved in speeding up the arrival of the Brothers. The city magistrates, at the entreaty of their

pastor, wrote to the Duke de Béthune, the governor of Calais, to obtain his approval and at the same time to beg him to use his influence to hasten the carrying out of the project. The matter could not have been put into better hands.

The Duke de Béthune was a nobleman distinguished even more by his piety than by his dignity. He took to heart the petition presented by the city, more out of zeal for God's glory than out of condescension toward those who had appealed to his influence. He did not disdain to join his own pleas to those of the pastor of Calais and his flock, begging De La Salle to send some Brothers to Calais as soon as possible.

The servant of God acceded to his request and sent to Calais two of his disciples[16] to open the Christian School there. One morning before this took place, it happened that De La Salle left his residence very early to go to call on the Duke de Béthune at his palace. About 6 A.M., he entered a nearby church to pray while awaiting a convenient time to present himself at the mansion to request an audience. Scarcely had he entered the church when he beheld the duke himself, who was just then receiving Communion. As he was unknown by sight to the holy priest, the latter noticed only the blue sash which distinguished that illustrious personage. De La Salle was both surprised and edified on seeing one of the greatest nobles in the kingdom performing his devotions so early in the morning with so much piety. When he had finished praying, he left the church and went to knock at the mansion door. His surprise was even greater when he recognized in the duke the same man whom he had seen receiving Communion with so much devotion. So impressed was the servant of God by this example of piety that against his custom, he wished to edify his community by telling the Brothers about his early morning adventure.

A gentleman so favorably disposed toward all that was good no sooner heard the Superior of the Brothers than he granted him everything he asked for: to send to the magistrates of the city his own consent in writing, signed by himself and sealed with his coat of arms, to recommend to them the good work which they themselves had recommended to him, and to exhort them, in his turn, to support and favor it. This recommendation, coming from such a highly placed personage whose authority in the city of Calais was loved as much as it was respected, produced all the effects that could have been desired. The officials of Calais have always shown the Brothers all sorts

16. One of them was Brother Gabriel Drolin.

of courtesies and have always acted toward them as fathers rather than as mere protectors. Monsieur Bignon, at this time the intendant of Picardy and Artois,[17] a nobleman who in all the positions he occupied has always protected the Gratuitous Schools with truly Christian zeal, also contributed to the establishment.

In this way, this foundation at Calais, destined to do so much good, was made with the unanimous cooperation of all who possessed any power and authority, and that of the bishop of Boulogne was not long in being added to the rest. The Brothers had been ordered by their Superior not to open the school until they had requested the bishop's permission to teach Christian doctrine and had asked for his blessing. Accordingly, they went to Boulogne and were very kindly received by M. Pierre de Langle, bishop of the diocese, who at this time had not become as notorious as he later did.[18] He authorized the Brothers' mission by a public letter to his clergy in which the chief pastor of the diocese of Boulogne urged the faithful in Calais to send their children to the Christian School.

On their arrival in the city, the Brothers found everything prepared in a most becoming manner. They had been impatiently awaited. Nobody took more concern about their coming than the man who had so longed to see them, the former pastor, Monsieur Ponthon. His joy on this occasion matched the ardor he had shown in securing their services. At first, the two Brothers were lodged in a wing of the college, which for the past several years has been placed entirely at their disposal by the mayor and the town council. The kindness of these gentlemen toward the Brothers and the schools they conduct grows day by day. Moreover, as the Brothers had little in the way of revenues to count on, the dean wrote on this subject to the Marquis de La Vrillière.

This was the last service that Ponthon rendered to the Brothers, because he died shortly after this, and his nephew, in whose favor he had resigned his position as parish priest, survived him only a few months. This young ecclesiastic, a most promising youth, died when he was still in Paris continuing his studies with perhaps too much ardor. His eager application to study caused him to find a premature death because of his too great earnestness. It seems that he would still be among the living had he known how to moderate a desire which,

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17. The intendants were agents of royal power, with legal and financial authority, compared with the nominal functions of the provincial governors.

18. He was one of the "appellants" against the papal Bull *Unigenitus* condemning Jansenism.

while noble and rare, leads those who yield to it to an early grave. His death, which was the price he paid to purchase knowledge, and that of his uncle, which had occurred a few months earlier, were deeply regretted.

In the uncle and the nephew, the Brothers lost two friends and protectors, and the city of Calais lost two faithful pastors. If the death of the younger Ponthon had not left the position of parish priest vacant, it is probable that those who later appealed against the Bull *Unigenitus* would have found the gates of such a Catholic city shut to them and would not have been able to foment so much trouble there. In this way, the zealous defenders of the Bull, professing the ancient doctrine of the Church, would not have been exposed in Calais to persecution and imprisonment, and Père Quesnel[19] would not have been able to flatter himself that he had a single partisan on the coast facing England. But let us return to our story.

The Marquis de La Vrillière replied to Ponthon's letter by saying that he would mention the subsidy for the Brothers to the king at the first council meeting, and this he did. His letter to Ponthon follows.

"Sir, I have received the letter you wrote me on the fifth of this month concerning the schoolmasters in Calais. I shall take the matter up with His Majesty at the first council meeting at which there is any discussion of the new converts [from Calvinist Protestantism], and I shall advise Bignon what His Majesty decides. Please ask them to be patient until then and to continue to carry out their duties faithfully. I am, my dear sir, your affectionate servant. La Vrillière. Versailles, 12 June 1701."

Louis XIV, as zealous for good works as he was for the promotion of religion, granted an alms to the Brothers as a result of the request made to him, and in the next two years, they received over 450 livres derived from the sale of property that had belonged to the expelled Calvinists. A similar favor was granted them in 1702 at the request of the Duke de Béthune. When this pious nobleman mentioned to M. d'Aguesseau that the two Brothers in Calais had no endowment to support them, he promised to see about it.

The following year, he sent them a considerable sum, likewise derived from the confiscated Calvinist properties, according to the promise he had made in a letter to the town officials, dated 4 February 1702. The success of the school was so prompt and so complete that means were sought of founding others. During two years, the

19. It was from Quesnel's book that the propositions condemned in the Bull *Unigenitus* were taken.

Brothers had taught school with so much edification and had given so much satisfaction that the authorities decided to ask for two more Brothers and for another to handle the temporal affairs.

The promoter of this new foundation was Monsieur Le Prince, chaplain in the sailors' quarter, who actively campaigned for its establishment in 1703. This zealous priest, wishing to secure for the children of the sailors the same opportunities for instruction that the children in the town enjoyed, resolved to obtain this for them. He mentioned the matter to Monsieur de Thosse, president of the city, who was delighted at the suggestion and supported it with as much truly Christian zeal as he could.

Without wasting any time, the worthy magistrate conferred with the members of his council, whom he found as eager as himself for the implementation of the project. Together they wrote to De Pontchartrain through their parish priest, explaining to him that another school and two more Brothers were needed in Calais to teach the children of the sailors, and they begged him to obtain from Louis XIV a vacant lot in the Court-Gain section of the town, where a guardhouse had once stood. The king granted the request. De Pontchartrain wrote to Bignon, sending him the king's order, which was at once executed, thanks to a special tax which the intendant imposed on the inhabitants of the Court-Gain section for the expenses incurred in erecting a building to house the Brothers and their school. De Pontchartrain was also kind enough to reply to the parish priest, telling him that the king had agreed to his request and to that of the city. Here is his letter, dated 4 May 1703:

"I have received your letter of 24 April. I have explained to His Majesty's intendant of Picardy and Artois the intentions of His Majesty concerning the Brothers of the Christian Schools, who have undertaken the instruction of the children of the sailors who live in the Court-Gain. Please address yourselves to him, and he will provide for their upkeep."

The Court-Gain was a section separate from the rest of the city of Calais, situated closer to the port. It was populated by sailors, who, as we all know, have usually received in their youth neither education nor instruction. They are religious at heart, but their religion is somewhat *sui generis*, since they fabricate it for themselves. Their children are accustomed to the sea from their early years and thus become like their parents, men who might be mistaken for half-men or for talking animals if we did not know that they have immortal souls. Nearly all of them are born with a propensity for the fisherman's trade or for sailing, and thus by instinct and by natural inclination, they follow the

vocation of their fathers. When they can scarcely talk, they already know how to handle the oars and are glad to go to sea. Since their ignorance is profound, they are usually as silent about religion as the fish they catch, and when they do undertake to speak of it, they do so with the awkwardness natural to them. Rarely do they observe it correctly and without superstitious practices. It was, then, very important to provide for these poor children of the mariners the means of receiving the instruction that their parents were not able to give them.

## Charity of the magistrates and people of Calais

This school, which opened in 1705, has always produced much good. Filled with the children of sailors, it is for them an academy where they learn the science of salvation. At last, these poor creatures find out why they were created and sent into this world. They learn how to know, fear, love, and serve God. They are taught Christian doctrine and the practice of their religion. To provide for the upkeep of the Brothers engaged in the instruction of these youngsters in the Court-Gain, the piety of Louis XIV led him to grant them an annual pension of 50 écus, which was paid to them every year by an order drawn up in these terms:

"Keeper of my royal treasure, pay and deliver, in cash, to the Brothers of the Christian Schools of Calais the sum of 150 livres which I have granted to them in consideration of the pains they take and the care they display for the instruction of the sailors who serve on my vessels. Given at Versailles. . . ."

Before the opening of the Christian School in the Court-Gain, there was an old man named De La France, who also received from His Majesty an annual pension of 150 livres to teach the sailors. Toward the end of his life, he could no longer accomplish his task, because of his age. This old man died a few years after the Brothers reached Calais. All the principal people of the city gave a new proof of their zeal for the Gratuitous Schools and of their affection for those who taught there to such general satisfaction. They all got together and arranged for the pension hitherto paid to the old schoolmaster to be transferred to the Brothers.

These two pensions, faithfully paid to the Brothers during the lifetime of Louis XIV, in spite of hard times, were suppressed by the regent during the minority of Louis XV. But this young prince, who inherited his great-grandfather's zeal for religion along with his throne, re-established the grant when he reached his majority, at the request of Marquis de La Vrillière, Minister and Secretary of State. The money

has been paid regularly ever since. Here is the first royal order, which was issued on 19 July 1716:

"Keeper of my royal treasure, Jean de Tulmence de Nointel: pay in cash to the Brothers of the Christian Schools of Calais the sum of 300 livres granted to them by the late king, my great-grandfather, in two installments of 150 livres each, one of which should have been sent in advance on 15 December last year, and the other, on 8 February. This is in consideration of the pains and care which they take for the instruction of my sailors. Done at Paris, 19 July 1717. Signed: *Louis, Phelippeaux, Philippe d'Orléans.*"

The charity of the magistrates of the city of Calais for the Christian Schools was not limited to all these favors. It was not satisfied until it had finally secured an assured livelihood for the Brothers. The city finally did this, some years ago, when it obtained for them a pension of 900 livres, the money coming from the duties collected on goods entering the city. Not only the city administration but nearly all its inhabitants sought to help the Brothers. Many of them vied with one another in showing them charity. There is hardly a merchant or businessman who, on returning from a trip overseas or after a successful business transaction or a particularly fortunate fishing expedition, does not, so to speak, pay them the tithes of his profits. In a word, the Brothers can say of the city of Calais what Tobias said of the angel Raphael: *We have been filled with good things through him.*

## The Duke de Béthune and his son, the Duke de Charost

As long as the Duke de Béthune lived, the Brothers always found in him a true father's heart. His charity was active in whatever concerned the Christian Schools, and his attention extended to all the needs of the Brothers. His influence, his authority, and his interventions were most helpful to them in getting solidly established in Calais and in obtaining from His Most Christian Majesty the pensions they needed to live on. After he died, the Brothers mourned his demise, but it did not take them long to realize that for them, the father continued to live in the son. The Duke de Charost, who inherited the piety of his father, the Duke de Béthune, had also inherited his zeal for the Christian Schools. He was a true friend of the Brothers, if I may say so, and was their zealous protector. His desire to help them seemed to know no limits, and we can indeed say on this point that the son surpassed the father. Oh happy family where piety seems hereditary and where love for religion is handed down to the children along with their father's noble blood!

In all their difficulties, the Brothers turned to the Duke de Charost with the confidence that children show to a father, and they have always found him such. Never did they beg for his protection in vain. Never did they approach him and suffer a rebuff; never did they seem to beg. Ever gracious and affable, the duke always listened to them with unexampled kindness whenever they sought to speak with him. His high position and his dignity never placed any barrier between them and him. Even more, on several occasions, he himself undertook with singular generosity and condescension to plead their cause, and he lent them the support of his influence and his authority by taking action on their behalf. Here is an example.

When the officials of the royal treasury did not pay out exactly the pension that His Majesty had granted to the Brothers—which happened not infrequently, despite the royal orders that came from the palace—the Duke de Charost, forgetting his dignity, took it upon himself to inquire about the matter and did not disdain to speak to the treasurers and to urge them to expedite the payments. When these were delayed, he would send his secretary, bearing the royal orders, to the treasurer to collect in the name of the Brothers the sums that were overdue and to make sure that they were paid in full.

It was not only the Brothers in Calais and Boulogne whom the Duke de Charost took under his protection; he never refused it to their confreres when they asked it of him. They always found the door of his palace open to them, his ears willing to listen to them, and his heart prompt and generous to be of service to them. In particular, this pious nobleman was most active and zealous to obtain from His Majesty the letters patent for the house of Saint Yon. He himself went to secure the consent of the Duke de Luxembourg, governor of Rouen, which was necessary, and brought it, written and signed, to those who were in charge of pursuing the affair. It would take us too long to go into the details of all the other favors that the Brothers of the Christian Schools owe to this illustrious benefactor. To him, more than to anyone else, they owe their present status. He always did them good and still does. His memory should remain forever alive among the Brothers, and it is only right that he and his father, the Duke de Béthune, should have first place in their gratitude and their prayers.

## Tribute to Monsieur Gense

In speaking of the establishment of the Christian Schools in Calais, we are obliged in gratitude also to make honorable mention of Monsieur Gense. This pious layman, who was so fervent in the practice of

virtue, so devoted to good works, and so zealous for the traditional faith, possessed a considerable fortune, which he used only to relieve the poor and to promote the glory of God. Although an only son, he adopted a life of perpetual celibacy in order to enjoy the happy liberty of devoting himself entirely to prayer and of consecrating his heart unreservedly to God. His humility alone shut before him the door of the sanctuary and forbade him to aspire to a ministry for which his learning and his virtue rendered him highly qualified. He preferred to remain in the ranks of ordinary Christians and there to give himself to the practice of perfect virtue rather than to be exposed to the dangers inherent in the sacred functions.

A lover of all good works, he was their author, their promoter, their helper, or their adviser. His zeal for the Catholic faith made him so well known that it won for him the honorable commission of keeping watch over the Huguenots and of finding out what they were doing at a time when the public exercise of their religion was forbidden in France. Although he wore secular attire, he acted in some way as an Inquisitor of the Faith, a vigilant sentinel in the house of the Lord, devoting himself to driving away from it those wolves dressed in sheep's clothing or else to helping the strayed sheep come back to the fold. After the suppression of Protestant preaching, he showed himself admirably active in going here and there to seek out the preachers and the supposed pastors. He found out about their gatherings and the places where they assembled, in order to have them prosecuted and thus obliged to depart from the country.

This constant activity brought him everywhere the Huguenots tried to gather. Ever on the move, all over Flanders, he caused the partisans of error to flee before him, and he converted a great number of those whom false doctrine had deceived. He was both learned and eloquent, and to these natural talents he joined a divine grace and power which touched and persuaded others. He had to discontinue his activity against heresy, because of the senility of his father, which obliged him to remain at home with him to take care of him in his old age and to comfort him in his declining years. If the old man, who died around 1704 at the age of ninety, interrupted the evangelical activity of his son, he never prevented either his hand or his tongue from combatting the errors of the times. Gense spoke unceasingly against the innovators, and wherever he happened to be, he attacked them with saintly intrepidity.

Never was anyone more openly in favor of Christian and Gratuitous Schools. This great lover of all good works gave this one his highest respect and prized it above all the rest. His joy was complete

when he saw the schools established in Calais. He had brought the Daughters of Providence there and endowed a community of six, after turning over his own house to them, where he also built a chapel for their use. As for the Brothers, they never had a more faithful friend, a more ardent defender, a more zealous protector. He took an interest in everything concerning them and made whatever affected their Institute or their schools his own business. He enjoyed being with them, and his happiness was complete when on occasion he was allowed to join them in prayer and to share their recreations. He came to be edified by their company, but he himself left behind a remarkable example of the very virtues he had sought to admire.

It is difficult to express how much he esteemed the Institute. He spoke of it with so much enthusiasm, gave it such high praise, that he made young men desire to join it and gave those who belonged to it the most exalted idea of their vocation. He encouraged them to fulfill its duties, to accept its pains and fatigues joyfully. In persecutions he became their shield and taught them to endure these crosses with patience and joy.

"You take your place," he told them, among other things, "as harvesters in the Lord's vineyard, and if you were not among the first invited to labor there, you have at least been called to work in its most abandoned corner. You are like the gleaners who hasten after the reapers to gather the stalks which have been neglected and trodden under foot. Your consolation is that there are so many of these that you can pick them up by the handful and with them fill the granary of our heavenly Father.

"If you do not stand at the altar, if you do not preach from the pulpit, if you do not sit in the tribunal of penance nor officiate at baptisms, if your work does not put a censer in your hands to offer incense to the Most High in the temple, at least you have the honor of preparing living temples for God and of laboring for the sanctification of the most abandoned children. If your ministry is less showy than others, it is also the least exposed to danger. If in the Church there are more honored roles, there are scarcely any more useful ones. She possesses plenty of monks and religious, but she lacks catechists dedicated by their state and vocation to the instruction of youth.

"When you teach Christian doctrine, you are doing the work of the Apostles. As you know, their zeal led them all over the world to preach and to proclaim the faith; you also know that prayer and the preaching of the doctrine of Jesus Christ were the two features of the ministry that they considered to be the most worthy of their attention as Apostles. They rid themselves of all other occupations, even those

directed to corporal works of charity, so as to dedicate themselves unreservedly to these two. Saint Paul concentrated on these same activities, and he himself declared that heaven had sent him to evangelize and to teach Christian doctrine."

In short, this fervent Christian could not find expressions strong enough to make the Brothers entertain a high idea of their vocation. Gense was in close contact with Monsieur de Rancé, the abbot of La Trappe. Every year he spent considerable time there and returned therefrom with a truly religious heart under his secular clothes. His esteem for the Brothers had caused him to conceive a very high regard for their holy Founder, and before dying, he wished to have the satisfaction of seeing him. Without waiting for time to bring about the opportunity for this visit he so longed for, he undertook a long trip with Monsieur de La Cocherie, the founder of the schools in the city of Boulogne, and went to Saint Yon near Rouen to meet the Solomon who had drawn him from so far.

The satisfaction they experienced in getting to know each other was reciprocal on the part of these two servants of God. The Divine Spirit, who filled both of them, gave them a mutual insight, and they loved each other even before they had seen each other, because their inclinations and sentiments were in harmony. In the layman, the priest admired the fervor of the early Christians, a noble evangelical simplicity, an ardent zeal for the salvation of his neighbor, and a great and magnanimous heart entirely dedicated to the service of God. In the priest, the layman admired a truly apostolic man, a vessel of election prepared by the Lord in his mercy in these later times to be the ornament of the Church in France, and a man accustomed to crosses and sufferings who had been tried by all sorts of tribulation and ignominy.

De La Salle received his two visitors with the cordiality and the testimonials of gratitude due to two friends and benefactors of his Institute. He spoke with them at length and fully satisfied their desire of seeing him and enjoying his presence. When they had visited and spoken with him, they were so edified and delighted that they declared that the esteem which they had entertained for him previously was far below what was really due him and that the reputation he had acquired did not equal that which his eminent virtue deserved.

They did not grow weary of admiring this new Solomon, filled with heavenly wisdom, not in the splendor of glory and wealth but living in a vile and abject condition, in the greatest poverty, yet more serene amidst sufferings, humiliations, and persecutions than the famous king of Israel was on his throne and in his magnificent palace.

They found in him the Spirit of God which they sought and a perfect example of the most eminent virtue. The conversations that took place among these three men, so alike in their inclinations, were all about God and the things of God. To speak with them with more seclusion and leisure, De La Salle brought his visitors to a little bower at the far end of the large garden at Saint Yon. The meal served to them in this little hermitage did not interrupt their pious conversation, and the three servants of God, more eager for spiritual than for bodily nourishment, spent the greater part of the day thus inciting one another to a greater love of God.

The satisfaction that Gense derived from this visit was proportionate to the desire which had brought him from Calais to Rouen. With equal satisfaction, he received De La Salle in 1716, when the Founder went for the first time to visit the Brothers in Calais. The holy priest could not refuse to go to dine with this pious layman. He did so twice and would have gone again, if he had not noticed a painter concealed behind the drapery and engaged in sketching his portrait. His humility was alarmed by this to such an extent that Gense could not prevail upon him to come back to his table. This fervent Christian crowned such a holy life by an equally holy death which took place a few years after that of De La Salle.

## Chapter XVII

*Opening of a Sunday School in the novitiate house in Paris; new establishments in Troyes and Avignon.*

Monsieur de La Chétardie, so well known for his firm attachment to sound doctrine and for his noble refusal of the bishopric of Poitiers, which had been offered to him by Louis XIV, seemed to rival De La Salle in showing himself a father to the Brothers, so filled with zeal was he for their Institute. This saintly parish priest of Saint Sulpice, who had so wittily remarked that his sixty-six years were also sixty-six reasons which prevented him from ascending the episcopal throne—as he said in the letter of thanks and excuse which he sent to His Majesty—considered his years as so many reasons for trying both to sanctify the great number of souls whose pastor God had made him and to contribute to the multiplication of the Christian Schools.

Ingenious about everything which could promote the education of the poor, he conceived the idea of establishing a Sunday School for

the young men who, occupied all the rest of the week in earning a living, had no time to receive instruction except on Sundays and feasts. No one but De La Salle was in a position to carry out a project of this nature. So, out of necessity and also of inclination, De La Chétardie asked the Founder to take charge of it. The servant of God, who had no less zeal than the pastor of Saint Sulpice, was glad to cooperate with him and willingly undertook the organization of this work which obedience entrusted to him and which he found much to his liking. Without delay, after securing the archbishop's approval and permission for the project, at noon on a Sunday in 1709,[20] De La Salle began in the novitiate house a sort of Christian Academy, open to all young men under twenty years of age. It did not take long for it to be filled to capacity.

Two hundred students, divided into various classes, were given instruction proper to their age and capacities. The least advanced learned how to read and write; others were taught arithmetic, and some learned drawing. This first class period, which lasted about two hours, was followed by the catechism lesson, and that one, in turn, by a spiritual exhortation given by one of the Brothers. The doors of this school were open to all who presented themselves, provided they showed goodwill. Thus none of these young men could excuse his ignorance of Christian doctrine and of the duties required for salvation on the pretext that he had to earn a living during the week.

It is easy for us to understand how much good was produced by this novel type of school, so necessary for young people who have nothing to do on Sundays and feasts and who, as a rule, spend this time learning vice. By means of this school, De La Chétardie had found a way 1) to withdraw a large number of young men from vice, disorder, and occasions of sin; their most innocent occupations on these holy days had been to run the streets and lose their time, while others profaned these days by gambling and debauchery; 2) to give them a taste for learning, to stimulate them to work, even to withdraw them from their laziness and lack of good manners, so as to give them a chance to get ahead and establish themselves in the world; 3) to keep them away from bad company, taverns, and other dangerous places so often fatal to these young people already inclined as they are to evil; 4) to encourage them to live the rest of their lives in a Christian manner.

Although I stated above that Sunday Schools were something new, I did not mean to suggest that De La Chétardie was the first to

20. The date here is incorrect; it was more likely 1699.

have thought of them, because they had been established in Flanders before his time, as we can see in Van Espen's *De scholis puerorum.* These Sunday Schools, says this Flemish canonist, were often mentioned in the councils held in Flanders. They grew out of the catechism lessons taught in the parishes on Sundays and feasts by the parish priests and their assistants. Although these schools, says the Council of Malines, were not founded to teach children to read and write, it is proper to offer these subjects to the children who attend them and to strive, above all, to instruct them in the principles of religion and the truths of faith. Van Espen adds that this regulation of the Council of Malines, held at the beginning of the seventeenth century, was confirmed by the authority of the prince and that it was strongly recommended that bishops should arrange for the establishment of such Sunday Schools and should provide for the livelihood of the men and women capable of teaching in them, whose duty it was to instruct the children on Sundays how to read and write and, above all, to make them learn the catechism. What De La Chétardie added to this institution of Sunday Schools was to add subjects such as drawing, geometry, and other branches of mathematics to the curriculum.

## After initial success, the Sunday School is closed

When he saw for himself the great good done in the Sunday School, De La Salle spared neither care nor expense to promote it. But God, who seemed to take pleasure in crucifying him in all things, permitted the enemy of all good to destroy this excellent institution by the very means that the servant of God had taken to consolidate it. He had placed at the head of the school two Brothers gifted with great talent and with considerable ability for art. To make them excellent professors, he had them learn drawing and whatever else might enable them to carry out the farsighted projects that De La Chétardie had in mind for this academy, but he soon had the disappointment of seeing that he had raised these Brothers up only for their own downfall.

Proud of their talents and hoping to use them for personal gain, they dishonored themselves by shamefully deserting their posts. Their departure caused this new school to close, because De La Salle had no other Brothers capable of replacing them, and the time it took to prepare others for this task brought about great changes in the circumstances and caused him to lose all hope of reviving the enterprise. In addition to the painful affliction he endured over the failure of so excellent a work and the loss of two of his dearest followers, the Founder had to bear the shame of being considered the cause of all

the trouble. Told to his face that he was responsible for the failure, he heard bitter recriminations on this score from several persons in authority. The innocent victim who never excused his own conduct allowed himself, as usual, to be accused and condemned, and relying on the testimony of his conscience alone and on God's approval, he abandoned his reputation to censure and to the effects of the most false and unjust prejudices, confining himself to bearing everything in silence and patience. We shall have more to say about this in the next chapter, when we relate the history of the new persecution that hell raised up against him and which lasted for the rest of his life.

## Opening Gratuitous Schools in Troyes

In 1702, De La Salle received a request for Brothers to establish a Gratuitous School at Troyes in Champagne. He sent two, who opened the school with the approbation of the bishop and under his auspices. This school owes its origin to Monsieur Le Bé, parish priest of Saint Nizier. A pious lady had left him an annuity of 200 livres to establish a Charity School in the parish. The priest felt that this money belonged by right to those who make profession of conducting Gratuitous Schools. During a trip he made to Paris, he spoke of this matter to De La Salle, and although the sum in question was most inadequate for the upkeep of two Brothers, the servant of God accepted, fearing that out of too great a concern for material interests, he might let slip an opportunity of teaching poor children in a large city. Provided the Brothers had what was absolutely necessary, he was satisfied. However, they needed a place to stay, and if they had to pay rent out of the 200 livres, they would have had practically nothing left to live on. De La Salle therefore asked the parish priest of Saint Nizier, who lived at the seminary, where he was the superior, to lodge the two Brothers in his presbytery, which was vacant. Agreement having been reached, the contract was signed in Paris without further delay.

The Brothers lived in the parish house during the lifetime of this zealous priest who always did all he could for the Christian Schools and those who taught in them. When he died, his successor, who did not care to reside at the seminary, obliged them to move. The Brothers were quite hard pressed at having to pay rent for a residence out of an annuity which scarcely sufficed for their living expenses. God, however, who never abandons those who consecrate themselves to the divine service, inspired several persons to help them pay the rent. Some years ago, a pious person willed them a considerable sum which was invested to contribute toward the purchase of a home.

A few years after Le Bé's opening of the first school in Troyes, Père Chantreau, who highly esteemed De La Salle's Institute as well as his person, successfully undertook to increase the number of Christian Schools in the city, his birthplace. This famous Oratorian, who possessed great speaking ability and preached with fervor and good results, saw God's blessings lavishly poured out wherever he went. As he sought nothing but God, he enjoyed much influence through his preaching and possessed a special grace for touching hearts. His faith was pure; his doctrine, sound and perfectly orthodox; his piety, profound. His virtue was proof against the greatest personal trials, which his modesty and prudence took care to keep hidden. He had been born poor, as he often stated to his intimate friends; he lived a poor life, often lacking the necessities, and was obliged to have recourse to charitable persons to defray the cost of travel and to supply his most pressing needs. This zealous preacher announced the Word of God, after the example of Saint Paul, in perfect disinterestedness. He remained detached from the goods of this world while enriching others with the treasures of heaven. Not surprisingly, he did not preach in vain. His word, like that of the Apostle, was effective and accompanied by virtue and a power from on high which converted souls.

The only thing he had at heart was the interests of God, and these he sought to promote by the multiplication of Christian Schools. The influence he had acquired over his fellow citizens by the success of his preaching enabled him to persuade them to ask for five more Brothers and to finance their subsistence in order to provide Christian instruction and education to all poor children of the city. For this purpose, during the series of Advent and Lenten sermons which he preached at Troyes and in his meetings with various people, he unceasingly stressed the need for and the advantages of the Gratuitous Schools, which produced such abundant and noticeable results in the places where they were already established.

His zeal aroused the citizenry to put together an annual sum of 300 livres, and he induced various persons to contribute to the good work. It was thus possible to open two new schools, one in the parish of Sainte Marie Madeleine and the other in the parish of Saint Jean, all with the approval of the bishop of Troyes, who took these schools under his protection. There are now seven Brothers in Troyes, who labor successfully at the instruction and pious education of a rather turbulent school population. The salaries of the Brothers are as modest as their work is heavy. Nevertheless, concern for securing the necessities of life does not dampen the zeal of these sons of Providence who have learned from their father to confide in God.

## De La Salle sends two Brothers to Rome

In that same year, 1702, De La Salle finally carried out the project which God had been suggesting to him for a long while: to send two of his disciples to Rome to establish a school there. The desire of implanting his Institute in the capital of the Catholic Church, so that from there it might spread throughout Christendom, was not the main objective he had in mind. Perhaps, in fact, his humility would have forbidden him to raise his eyes so high.

His real motives were these: 1) to plant the tree of his Society and make it take root in the center of Catholic unity, in the shadow and under the eyes of the pope and the Holy See; 2) to found his Institute on solid rock, that rock against which the gates of hell will never prevail, and to attach it to that Church which can neither perish nor falter; 3) to prepare for himself a means to go some day to prostrate himself at the feet of the Vicar of Jesus Christ to ask his approbation for his rules and constitutions and to receive for the Brothers the privilege of making the three solemn vows of religion; 4) to obtain the apostolic blessing for his Institute, in order to strengthen it by placing it under the protection of the head of the Church, and to obtain approval of its mission of teaching Christian doctrine under the supervision and authority of the bishops. Finally, the pious Founder wished to send some of his disciples to the primary city of the Church, the source of Catholic unity, who could vouch for his own faith, for his inviolable union with the Holy See, and for his submission to its decisions at a time when so many people in France seemed to flout them without remorse.

Such were the sentiments which he had always sought to impart to his disciples, in which he had carefully brought them up, and which he had explained to them from 1694 on, when they made the perpetual vow of obedience. From that time on, he had decided that they should work to obtain the approval of the Holy See. He mentions this himself in the first article of his last testament.[21] It was this that he wished to give evidence to when he added to his name the title "Roman priest,"[22] which is how he signed the vow we mentioned previously.

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21. This is not the reason the Founder gives in his last testament. In these two paragraphs, Blain misinterprets the Founder's intention. There is abundant evidence in De La Salle's letters that papal approval was not the object of the Rome mission, and there never was a question of "solemn" vows.

22. The original document in the Rome archives does not have this expression.

If up to this time the pious Founder had not been able to send any of his disciples to Rome, it was solely because he was too poor to do so. So far, he had lived in hope that Providence would procure for him the means of defraying the cost of such a lengthy trip or would offer the Brothers whom he wished to send a chance to make the journey at the generosity of some charitable person. But whether he found such an opportunity too long in coming or whether, after serious reflection, it seemed to him that there was too much danger in exposing the virtue of his disciples to the hazards of so long a trip, whether they went on foot in a group or if they traveled in the company of some benefactor, he made up his mind to send them alone and to pay their way himself.

But where could he get the money needed by the travellers going such a long distance and who had to have some means of subsisting in Rome once they got there? This difficulty which might have stopped anybody else did not even occur to him. Nothing upset this man who relied on Providence, because he had often learned by fortunate experience that Providence takes care of those who trust in God. He therefore abandoned to God's hands the two generous Brothers who, at his invitation, put their trust in God to provide for their needs when they got to the place where obedience assigned them. He gave them only a small sum of money to help them on the road. In 1702, his Community was still so poor that it took all the cash on hand to furnish the travelers with ten pistoles.[23] Of course, such a modest sum, although representing the entire wealth of the Community, was far from sufficient for the expenses of such a long trip, but it could, on occasion, at least make up for the lack of liberality among the faithful.

What De La Salle had foreseen did, in fact, happen. The money, which was insufficient to get the two Brothers to Rome without the help of outside charity, gave out. So they found themselves in the hands of that Divine Providence to which he had entrusted them, and God provided for the one of the two Brothers who showed great courage and patience in persevering under all trials. The other, the younger of the two, came back to France a few months after departing from it and left behind in Rome his older companion, named Gabriel Drolin, who persevered in Rome unwaveringly for twenty-six years. At first, he had to endure stringent poverty and met with great difficulties. Eventually, in the third year of his stay, he obtained the direction of one of the Charity Schools founded by the pope in various

23. A pistole was worth about ten livres.

sections of the city of Rome. His salary was only fifteen livres a month, barely enough to live on. This virtuous Brother could certainly have found a more lucrative situation. One had even been proposed to him; he was offered different benefices to which were attached fairly substantial revenues. These he could have accepted, since he was a tonsured cleric and had studied theology. But this faithful disciple of a master whom he had seen giving up everything preferred to follow his example rather than profit by the good fortune that was offered him.

Since the Institute of the Gratuitous Schools was approved by the Holy See only a long time after De La Salle had sent his two disciples to Rome with the mission of preparing for this approbation, Brother Drolin was obliged to modify his dress. Most likely, he stopped wearing the Brothers' habit on the advice of his wise Superior,[24] who considered that it was hardly proper to display before the eyes of the Mother Church a garb which she had not yet sanctioned by her approval. Since the Brother was tonsured, he donned the clerical habit, which was well suited to his profession and one in which he could appear to best advantage before the court of Rome. Despite differences in local customs, the disciple tried to follow the wise advice of his spiritual guide and kept in close touch with him. Nor did the good father forget his child so far away; he was careful to send him money from time to time so that he would not be in want.

Ever since the death of De La Salle, the perseverance of this faithful disciple in Rome has achieved, at least in part, the effect that the Founder had hoped it would. The Institute has since been approved as a religious order with the three solemn vows.[25] To this favor of the Apostolic See, Pope Benedict XIII, of happy memory, added another which may become the source of many more, for he gave the Brothers the school where Clement XI had established Brother Gabriel, under the name of Signor Gabriel Drolin. Once this was done, Brother Gabriel, having succeeded after twenty-six years in the pious design which had been the main object of his coming to Rome, left the school in the hands of the two Brothers sent to replace him, and he returned to France in 1728.

When he got back to Avignon, at the age of sixty-five, he made his vows, which were received by the Brother Superior General, who happened to be there then. Now at last, his soul can rejoice in the grace which he had gone so far to seek and which he had waited for,

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24. The letters of De la Salle indicate otherwise.

25. The approval envisions neither "religious order" nor "solemn vows."

persevering from 1702 until 1728. This venerable Brother accomplished perfectly the vow which he had made with his dear father never to abandon the Institute and to labor until death to promote its establishment by every means at his disposal. He deserves all the more praise because the second Brother, who made the same vow with him, was unfaithful and compounded his infidelity with ingratitude, rebellion against his Superior, and embezzlement of the funds destined for the establishment of a seminary for country schoolmasters. That act led to the ruin of this excellent enterprise which has never been revived since.

In these two men, we see verified the truth of the words of Jesus Christ, *One will be taken, and the other left.* One of them, the Director of the Saint Hippolyte training center for country schoolmasters, who had kept only the most tenuous connection with the Society, ended up by leaving it when chance provided him with a profitable way of doing so, and God, who knows the human heart and its attachments, let him succumb to the ambition which ruled him and dragged him down to such great crimes. The other, Brother Gabriel Drolin, who was sincerely attached to his state and walked generously in the footsteps of his saintly Superior, had renounced all worldly desires and thus was not tempted even by the most legitimate offers. He preferred his lowly and despised vocation to a more honorable and comfortable one which would have allowed him to emerge without delay from a condition of extreme poverty to one of relative affluence. This fidelity obtained for him the grace of finally seeing the Holy See approve his Institute and of making his profession in it, after giving the Brothers an example of inviolable attachment to his vocation, perfect detachment from the things of earth, and union and constant submission to his worthy father.

## Opening Gratuitous Schools in Avignon

Although they were not opened until 1703, we shall mention here the founding of the Christian Schools in Avignon, because they had been requested and agreed upon as early as 1702. This was just when the persecution we shall describe in the next chapter was beginning to get under way. Humanly speaking, this persecution which shook the new Institute to its very foundations should have caused its collapse. As we behold it always on the brink of destruction during fifteen years, we can only wonder that it was not eventually buried beneath its own ruins. We can also wonder that God chose the first four years of this long persecution, the most trying ones, to extend to several

cities of the kingdom a congregation which was still in its infancy, not securely established, and threatened by imminent shipwreck.

In fact, we shall see the highest and most respectable authority strike the shepherd, intimidate the sheep, undertake to place them under a stranger's direction, and strive thereafter to keep them disunited, to cause several of them to grow disenchanted little by little, and to alter the form of government. All this was due to the intrigues of a highly placed personage who enjoyed great prestige and a notable reputation, one who, from being a protector of the servant of God, became his most bitter antagonist. De La Salle, obliged to flee before him, had to leave his flock to the care of Providence, and the enemy of the virtuous Founder took advantage of his absence to attempt to set aside the practices he had established, along with his memory, and to make his children forget their father.

The same period when these spiritual ravages were occurring in the new Institute was also the epoch of its greatest expansion. This was the time decreed by divine wisdom to establish Christian Schools in various parts of France. This Institute, which at this period seemed to be in flames, afterward appeared to rise again from its own ashes. Persecution not only served to spread it and to multiply its members but also produced in its favor the same effects it had brought about at the beginning of the Church. What results did persecution have when Christianity was in its cradle? It attacked the Apostles furiously and obliged them to disperse all over the world, and God made use of this dispersion of the first heroes of the Gospel to convert the Gentiles. In a similar way, just when the cruelest persecution deprived the servant of God of nearly all his authority over his men, when it obliged him either to flee or to go into hiding, when it incited his enemies to raise their hands against him everywhere, God opened up vast new fields for his zeal and multiplied the Christian Schools. In less than four years, in fact, ten new establishments were created, the first being in Avignon.

For a long time, De Salle had been urged by several pious persons of rank to send some Brothers to open Gratuitous Schools in Provence, Languedoc, and the surrounding areas. This suggestion, which might have flattered a man who still retained some vestiges of self-love and who might have been pleased to think that his disciples would carry his name so far away, on the contrary, seemed to the servant of God a dangerous thing and one deserving of serious thought. Far from hastening the execution of this project, the fear of the perils which his disciples might be exposed to held him back and made him hesitate for a long time over what he should do.

He feared lest his sheep, too far from their shepherd and out of reach of his voice, might choose new paths for themselves. He feared lest the distance separating the children from their father might in the long run induce them, little by little, to set aside the yoke of his legitimate authority. He feared that not being under his immediate direction and lacking the encouragement of his presence, they might lose the spirit of their state and that once their piety grew weak, they might seek to liberate themselves and fall into relaxation, might cease cultivating regularity, and finally, might become victims of a disorderly life. He was afraid that accepting new foundations might cause prejudice to the existing ones. He realized that with the growth in the number of schools, he would have to find additional Brothers, which might mean accepting candidates barely suitable to carry on the work, once it got started.

Finally, his most serious concern was exposing his subjects to heresy in lands formerly infected with it, especially in Languedoc. There was a danger that the Brothers might be led astray or might succumb to the bad example of so many people who lived with no religion at all, whom the so-called Reformation had left behind, even after it was presumed to have been abolished. Still, since he had abandoned himself to the guidance of Providence in all things, he thought he could discern God's will in the continual requests made to him to send some of his disciples to these distant places.

The city of Avignon was the first to obtain some Brothers. This was at the request of Monsieur de Châteaublanc, the treasurer of our holy father the pope in the county of Avignon.[26] His wife, a lady of great piety, had left a legacy to found a Charity School and had strongly urged her husband to hasten the establishment of this much-needed institution for poor children. The husband, as virtuous as his wife, took this good work to heart; all he was waiting for, in order to execute the last will of his deceased wife, was to find men capable of carrying out her intentions.

While he hesitated over the choice of teachers to whom he could entrust the Charity School, it happened, fortunately, that a pious person from Lyon informed him that in Paris there existed an Institute of Brothers devoted to this very type of work. This first acquaintance he had with the Brothers' Institute made De Châteaublanc anxious to have them. He did not delay in writing to De La Salle, begging him to send him two Brothers. The deliberation with which the servant of

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26. Avignon was part of the papal states from 1229 until 1791, when it was seized during the French Revolution.

God went about answering this request did not abate the gentleman's zeal, and an unexpected meeting with a Brother of the Institute caused him to renew his efforts. This Brother was one of the two whom De La Salle had sent to Rome; he came through Avignon on his return to France. De Châteaublanc, along with several other pious personages, was delighted to meet him and made him stay for a while. Then, together they addressed new appeals to the wise Superior, asking him to send them some of his disciples as soon as possible. The servant of God recognized the will of God in all this. He no longer dared to delay in answering the requests made to him and sent to Avignon two Brothers, who were received there with extraordinary tokens of esteem and affection.

The pious treasurer of His Holiness, who had so ardently desired the Brothers and had pleaded for them, lodged them in a house of which he had the use, while waiting until the one he had bought for them was ready for occupancy. Since the legacy of his late spouse did not suffice, he supplemented it with a liberality worthy of a man who had consecrated his own person and all his goods to God and to good works. While everything was being prepared for the opening of the Charity Schools, the Brothers went to prostrate themselves at the feet of François-Maurice de Gontery, archbishop of Avignon,[27] to receive his benediction, his orders, and their own commission. This pious prelate welcomed the Brothers with uncommonly cordial tokens of kindness. They won his heart and his goodwill, and time has only strengthened these dispositions. This illustrious archbishop, one of the outstanding benefactors of the Brothers' Institute, should not be passed over in the life of their Founder. It is only right to memorialize him in the annals of their Society and to keep fresh the memory of what it owes him. Under the auspices of this zealous prelate, the charitable school was opened in Avignon in 1703. From the start, the good it produced was so great and so obvious that all those interested in religious enterprises wished to have more such schools.

Advocates of the Christian Schools did not fail to let De La Salle know how they felt. As early as March 1705, De Châteaublanc wrote to him to persuade him to send a second contingent of Brothers. He urged him to do this, invoking all the motives which can impress a man who cared only about God. He assured the Founder that *he was extremely satisfied with his disciples, that the city was very much edified by their conduct, and that His Excellency, the vice-legate, was so*

27. The archbishop at the time was Laurent Fiesci. It was much later that De Gontery succeeded him as archbishop of Avignon.

*happy over this foundation that he gave expression to his pleasure wherever he went.*

That prelate certainly continued in these dispositions, as we shall see, and he later helped the Brothers considerably by his influence at the papal court when the time came to secure approval for their Institute. When De Châteaublanc was writing the above-mentioned letter, one of the parish priests of the city was negotiating to secure the opening of a Gratuitous School in his parish, but the death of a very wealthy and pious nobleman on whom he had counted and who, he hoped, would underwrite his project made it come to nothing. De Châteaublanc, however, was not discouraged. When he asked De La Salle for two more Brothers, he undertook to provide for their upkeep until such time as Providence would do so by some other means. *I have no doubt*, he said in his letter, *that God will do so, because this is, of all charitable enterprises, the one most necessary in this city. I hope, my dear sir, that you will come and see for yourself and that we shall have the honor of welcoming you.*

This request by De Châteaublanc was too reasonable to be turned down. In the classes already functioning, the work was becoming heavier than two Brothers could handle. It was therefore necessary to send them some help and to increase the number of classes. Divine Providence did indeed come to their aid, as the pious treasurer had hoped. The archbishop and the vice-legate, by order of the great Pontiff, Clement XI, undertook to provide for the Brothers' needs. The Holy Father's representative wished to be the founder of the new school, and God did not delay in granting to the pious archbishop the foretaste of the reward he had prepared for him in heaven for this good work, for he saw with his own eyes the great good that was done.

The archbishop himself went to visit the schools and took pleasure in beholding the fine order and discipline which reigned in them. Delighted by the methods the Brothers used in teaching, he spent hours observing them and listening to the students. He made himself the judge of their progress in the knowledge of Christian doctrine, and his joy was to hear them disputing, in innocent rivalry, the honor of knowing and reciting catechism lessons best and winning the prize awarded to the victors. He even had them come to his palace, where he could judge their grasp of what they had learned, and honored them by listening to them recite the catechism. When the holidays came, Archbishop de Gontery kept for himself the privilege of going to announce them and to dismiss both the scholars and their teachers for the vacation.

His influence was of great weight in Rome when the time came to secure the approval of the Brothers' Institute by the Holy See. The authentic certificate which he gave them to present to the Roman authorities, dated 20 February 1720, contained high praise for them and strongly influenced the court of Rome to grant them what they asked. Among other things, this document declared: "Since the founding of the Gratuitous Schools in the city of Avignon, they have always fulfilled their duties with great zeal and assiduity; the public derives great advantages from their labors, and their efforts to educate children in the Christian manner, as well as their modesty and the purity of their morals, have always been a source of edification to everyone." This virtuous prelate showed his kindness toward the Brothers in even the least details and went out of his way to give personal testimony about them to people whom he knew.

In 1728, he welcomed to Avignon the Brother[28] who had at one time been the Director of the Gratuitous Schools and now was Superior General of the Institute. He gave him extraordinary tokens of his tender charity and permitted him to install a chapel where Mass could be celebrated and where the Brothers from the area could hold their assemblies for the retreat after which they pronounced their vows, just as the others had done at Saint Yon after receiving the Bull of Approbation which Benedict XIII of happy memory had recently granted to them. The humility of the prelate would not have been satisfied if he had not come in person to visit this chapel and greet the Brothers and if he had not honored their gathering by his presence. The house where this chapel is located is at the present time the general gathering place where all the Brothers living in these regions, too far removed from Saint Yon, come every year to hold their meetings, make their retreats, and renew their vows when the Superior General passes through on his visitations. Such is the testimonial which justice and gratitude make it a duty to pay to this pious prelate whom the Brothers consider as one of their powerful protectors and as a true father.

To a lesser degree, De Châteaublanc, the papal treasurer, also entertained similar sentiments toward the Brothers. He, too, helped them with his influence in the court of Rome, making himself their panegyrist rather than their patron. There is no sort of service which this pious layman is not happy to do for them. He would deserve a place among the ranks of the early Christians. His modesty does not allow us to speak any more of him; it is after his death that he should be praised, as the Holy Spirit says. He was the soul of all the good works

28. Brother Timothée.

undertaken in the city of Avignon. After consecrating his person to God, he used his great wealth in bestowing liberal alms on the poor and in promoting works of charity.

## CHAPTER XVIII

*The origin and first stages of the furious persecution which arose against the holy Founder, which obliged him to leave Paris, and which wrought havoc in his Institute until the end of his days.*

The violent persecution which, in 1702, struck the Founder of the Christian Schools with the sudden and unforeseen impetuosity of a bolt of lightning from heaven arose, to all appearances, out of the harsh and indiscreet conduct of the Director of Novices whom he had appointed to take his place when he was absent. In reality, its cause goes back to an unjust and biased attitude toward him which was assumed by a person who enjoyed great influence in Paris and which he gave vent to on this occasion.

If we were to name this person, now that he is dead, we would not consider ourselves to have blackened his memory nor in any way to have tarnished the outstanding reputation which he enjoyed all his life and which was not buried in his tomb. It is nothing new, indeed, for extremely worthy men to disagree, to adopt divergent behavior patterns, and to entertain contradictory views. A diversity of appreciations about how to procure the glory of God makes people oppose each other, even though all of them aim at the same result. At all times, the saints who walk this earth have occasionally caused each other to suffer, and although each follows his own path toward God, it sometimes happens that their paths cause them to clash.

If it is true that the persecutions suffered by God's favored children in this mortal flesh ordinarily come from devotees of the world, it is no less true that similar contradictions at times arise from good people. Of all the different kinds of trials they have to put up with, this is the most humiliating, the hardest to bear. If the saints are attacked by the world and meet with scorn and outrage on its part, this experience simply fulfills God's prophecies: *For if the world hates you, know that it has hated me before you; if it persecutes you, it has persecuted me before you. All those who wish to live in piety will suffer persecution.*

But for God's own servants to declare war on others of God's friends is something that surprises us and increases their dismay and anguish. In this world, everybody condemns in advance those who are blamed by men who enjoy a reputation for virtue, and everybody considers as justified the unfavorable judgments and the unkind conduct the virtuous display toward those they censure. The world's malice leads it always to suspect the worst; it issues its guilty verdicts without examining the facts. With the most shocking lack of thought and the most extreme temerity, it tries and condemns the greatest saints as soon as it sees them attacked by people who have a deserved reputation for probity. In such cases, even the most pious persons are tempted to agree with these accusers and to take their side. Hence it happens that opposition from good people is for persons of the highest virtue a cloud which hides or a veil which entirely obscures their merits.

Let us, therefore, not be surprised if we see earthly angels at odds with one another, so to speak, since those of heaven sometimes engage in seeming disputes, so long as the will of God remains hidden to them on subjects they are interested in. The angels who sought the conversion of the Babylonians wished to keep among them the Jews who adored the true God, so that their belief, confirmed by their example, might open the eyes of these misguided people and make them understand that God is one and that he deserves worship—in a word, to help them accept the true religion. At the same time, the tutelary angels of the people of God feared lest the contagion of bad example from these idolaters and daily communication with such a corrupted people might, in the long run, alter the purity of faith and the morals of the Israelites. So they sought to hasten their departure from a land given over to sin and strove so that the prince might allow them to return to Jerusalem. Thus these blessed spirits opposed each other in a combat inspired by charity, which might have delayed the return of the Jews from their captivity in a strange land, had not the authority of the Prince of Angels, Saint Michael, decided in favor of the guardian angels of the People of God.

The dispute between Saint Paul and Saint Barnabas, which occasioned their separation and made them break away from each other in their apostolic mission, is known to everyone. Few are ignorant of the quarrel involving Saint Cyprian and other bishops of his party with Pope Saint Stephen, who upheld by his authority and by appealing to tradition the Church's doctrine concerning baptism conferred by heretics. Constantinople and the entire Orient were aware of the difference of opinion that opposed Saint Epiphanias to Saint John

Chrysostom on the question of the monks called the Great Brothers. At about the same time, the dispute between Saint Jerome and Saint Augustine flared up sharply, even though it did not last very long. Church history provides many other examples of opposition between saints who often strenuously opposed each other and even stirred up opposition against each other on this earth while pursuing the same goal, the glory of God, but by different means.

It was, then, nothing new if De La Salle had to endure persecution on the part of a person whose merits and virtues caused him to be highly regarded in Paris. If we do not reveal the name of this person and avoid giving any details which might arouse any suspicion as to his identity, it is not because we feel that naming him might stain his memory, because he may have had the best of intentions in doing what he did. The truth is that the pious persecutor of the innocent Founder was right in disapproving of and in having condemned by superior authority certain exaggerated and imprudent penitential practices. Since these had, however, been commanded and carried out without De La Salle's knowledge and in his absence, he should not have been held responsible for them. It was wrong to attribute to the father the indiscretions and violent procedures of two of his children whom he had placed in charge of the others.

## De La Salle persecuted for the indiscretion of two Directors

Little by little, I have finally come to the start of this persecution of which we must now speak. As indicated previously, the need of attending to the business of his Institute as it progressed had obliged the Founder to appoint a Brother to take charge of the novitiate during his absence. This Brother possessed solid virtue but lacked judgment and prudence. He was harsh with himself and even harsher with others, and he had his equal in the Brother Director of the schools in Paris. These two men, so much alike by their want of discretion and their intemperate zeal, made quite insupportable a yoke which was already heavy enough in itself but which fervor, good example, and the wisdom of De La Salle made more endurable to those weakling souls who dwelt too much on what they suffered.

At first, the novices, disgusted and repelled by the excessive severity of their Director, found in their father's kindness and charity a balm for their wounded spirits. As the wise Superior expected true virtue of them, he led them to attribute their ill feeling with regard to the Director of Novices to their own lack of humility and of obedience, and he got them to humble themselves for this by admitting

their failings and by submitting promptly. He taught these malcontents to condemn themselves, never to question the one placed over them, and to seek peace of heart in patience and mortification.

But the two Brothers in charge, who had not enough sense to profit by their own faults and to make use of these to correct themselves, abused the submission which their wise Superior caused their inferiors to show them. They embittered more and more these hearts already badly disposed toward them, and by pushing these weak individuals too hard, in the end they caused them to fall. And fall they did.

The presence of De La Salle was a remedy for all these evils. He uplifted those who had fallen, encouraged the fainthearted, fortified the wavering, and by the grace and unction of his words, soothed the hurt caused by the conduct of the two indiscreet Brothers. The problem, although it had been in existence for some time, remained secret as long as the suffering Brothers could see the physician who knew how to heal them. But in his absence, the harshness and imprudence of his delegates, which were at the bottom of all this, so outraged some of the young men who were already embittered that their ulcerated hearts sought vengeance and led to public complaints, thus revealing the exaggerated penances imposed on them.

The one who was most shocked by all this was the one who should have been least impressed. Although a man of outstanding merit, enlightened, solidly pious, and experienced, he let himself be prepossessed to such a point—God allowed this for the sanctification of De La Salle—that from being a friend, protector, and benefactor, he turned into a secret enemy and a hidden but violent persecutor of the servant of God. Oh strange example of human frailty! This great man, who seemed to honor De La Salle as a saint and to admire his virtue, changed his heart and his attitude toward him overnight, lost all esteem for him, and considered him to be a person lacking in common sense who did not know how to deal with people. He reported the Founder to the higher superiors and to several other outstanding prelates, painting him as a ridiculous and extravagant victim of his own ill-considered piety.

And yet, the man who under the pretext of principles and of piety was thus blackening the good name of the servant of God was the man who should have known him best, because he had the closest contacts with him and had for a long time worked together with him in various good works. It was he who had shown himself his defender and patron and had displayed remarkable zeal in furthering the growth of the new Institute.

His error lay in blaming an innocent man for the faults committed in his absence, faults which he knew nothing about and which two indiscreet Brothers had indulged in without his approval. Certainly these actions deserved condemnation, and those who had corrected others in such a barbarous fashion themselves deserved severe reprehension. But why, without hearing De La Salle, blame and condemn him for deeds of his inferiors accomplished in his absence? The reason seems to be that the two imprudent Brothers were thought to have acted at their father's instigation, that their notions were inspired by him, and that he had authorized, either by his orders or by his example, the inhuman type of correction which had given scandal. That was precisely the idea which was taken for granted and which instead should have been verified. It amounted to making a wise and virtuous priest responsible for the intemperate actions of men led by unrestrained and imprudent zeal. At least before proceeding to accuse and depose him, care should have been taken to establish the facts, to listen to witnesses, and to show convincingly by unequivocal proofs that the Superior was the real author of—or at least the conniver in—the indiscreet practices which were being censured.

Since he had been away from Paris at the time these things happened, there certainly existed a presumption that De La Salle was not aware of what had gone on in the house and that the indiscreet Brothers had profited by his absence to carry their spirit of harshness to the extreme and to yield to their penchant for a type of penance inspired by ill humor and an uncouth temperament rather than by the Spirit of God. Charity and prudence would have demanded at least that judgment be suspended on this occasion and that the condemnation of the Superior should not have been so hastily decided on account of what his inferiors had done.

The truth of the matter, however, is that the enemy was seeking an excuse for a quarrel and for some time had been poorly disposed toward the servant of God. It happens often enough that very minor clashes lead to major consequences, and it is not rare for slight misunderstandings to develop into broken friendships and definitive breaks. The man of whom we are speaking, who before this had been so favorable to the servant of God, had allowed himself, little by little, to grow prejudiced against him, although no one knows why. This ill-founded prejudice had prepared his heart to listen to and to believe anything anyone might say against the Brothers' Superior. The moment was ripe for misunderstandings to break out between these two men who, when working together, had already brought about such great progress for the Gratuitous Schools and whose cooperation

provided hope for even more advances in the future. No wonder that the evil spirit was so quick to take advantage of this occasion and to add to their mutual incomprehension by fomenting gossip and tales which completed the task of irritating their unsettled relations.

We can leave to God, who reads the depths of minds and hearts, to decide by what sort of casuistry De La Salle's former friend became his most redoubtable, although secret, adversary and to determine whether some secret passion, disguised under the honorable aspect of zeal, was not in reality the moving force which led him to stir up so much trouble for the servant of God. *So often*, says the author of The Imitation, *we are moved by passion, and we call it zeal; so often, cupidity reigns where in appearance nothing but charity is present.* It is a fact that the complaints against the harsh and indiscreet conduct of the two Brothers to which this man listened were entirely in line with the prejudices he had already formed against De La Salle; thus it was easy for the devil to deceive him and to make him conclude that the Superior was responsible for the faults of his inferiors. This is how the devil always finds within us the tendencies he uses to tempt us. But whatever may be the truth concerning the secret motives that aroused these violent prejudices against the servant of God, here are the facts which provided the pretext for them and led up to them.

## Two novices complain of harsh treatment

The imprudent Director of Novices, who was in charge at the Grande Maison during a short trip that his Superior had to undertake, felt that this was his chance to give free rein to the impetuosity of his intemperate zeal with regard to certain candidates who had even less virtue than he had prudence. The indiscreet penances he inflicted on these young men did not help them to correct their faults but provided obvious proofs of his brutality. This furnished the evidence needed to back up the complaints lodged against De La Salle at the palace of the archbishop. These angry and scheming young men brought their grievances out publicly and sought revenge on the presumed author of the penances which had irritated them and of the shame and resentment they had experienced.

The person to whom they went with their story, who was already ill disposed toward De La Salle, as we have seen, welcomed the plaintiffs and listened to them with a kind and gracious air which not only loosened their tongues but also made them feel free to vomit forth all the venom pent up in their hearts. He then asked them to put their charges in writing and to sign them, which they were glad to do.

These written statements served the purpose of the servant of God's enemy even better than he could have hoped, because they exaggerated the ill-treatment these youths had received and the penances inflicted on them. Thus enjoying the pleasure of revenge, their self-love taught them how to paint the situation in false colors and to mingle false accusations with the true. Blinded and furious as they were, they did not realize that it was not their Director of Novices but their good father who would have to drink deeply for the rest of his life this chalice which they were filling with the bitterness welling up from their hearts.

The confidant of these rebellious novices was not the man to cause an immediate uproar and thus give warning of the secret trap he was preparing. He knew how to handle affairs of this nature and how to insure success by careful and circumspect behavior. Furthermore, not being conscious of the secret passion which indisposed him, he proposed to himself, in the persecution he was preparing, nothing but the noblest of motives: the glory of God, the advantage of the Gratuitous Schools, and the presumed need to give the Brothers a new form of government and to protect their Institute by taking away from them a Superior incapable of governing them properly. After all, this man was not De La Salle's superior and had no authority over him, his Community, or his person. Consequently, he could do nothing against the Founder except by intrigue and clandestine maneuvers. What had to be done was to sow doubts about him in the minds of the higher superiors, to make them think of him as an unyielding, stubborn, presumptuous man, wedded to his own ideas, austere and pitiless in dealing with his inferiors, and excessively harsh in punishing the slightest faults, as a man who never made any allowance for human weakness, and finally, as a person of limited understanding, quite unequal to the task of governing the new Institute properly.

It was not all that easy, however, to depict De La Salle in such an unfavorable light in the eyes of an archbishop who entertained no prejudices against him, was naturally benevolent and moderate, and indeed was strongly inclined to favor a man whom he loved and whom he had come to esteem, even before knowing him personally, on the strength of the reputation for holiness he had acquired in the environs of Reims. Furthermore, the written statements he received had not been directed against De La Salle but against the Director of Novices, and it was not easy to lay on the former the blame for the faults of the latter in the mind of the cardinal, who did not share the secret animosity animating the accuser. Prudence, therefore, suggested delay until new accusations might be forthcoming, until new

charges might entangle in the affair the responsibility of the innocent one whose ruin was being sought.

The opportunity came soon enough. The Director of Novices had his counterpart in the Director of the Paris schools. Inclined to the same sort of violence and imprudence, this man proceeded to the same lengths, providing the persecutor with new ammunition against his innocent rival. This Director of the Paris schools, with the other Brothers of his small community, had come as usual to the novitiate to spend the Sunday. There he made the same misuse of his authority as his friend, the Director of Novices, had done. The object of his brutality was a novice who had been put under his charge when he was sent to do practice teaching in the Paris schools. This young man, who was already strongly tempted to give up his vocation, ran away and went to testify to the harshness of the penances inflicted on him. He spoke to the very same person whom the first accusers had approached with their complaints. The marks left by the cruel treatment he had received were obvious proofs of the truth of his story.

No doubt they should have turned to the disgrace of the one who had inflicted them, but before imputing them to De La Salle, it should have been ascertained whether he had in one way or another taken part in such shocking behavior. As the Superior, he could have been held responsible for it, if he had given occasion to it by secret or public orders, by his approval or advice, by his example, or even by his silence. But if the second fact, like the first, had happened during his absence, without his knowledge, and against his intentions, if his own conduct, his mentality, his way of acting had never occasioned such indiscretions, it was not right to blame him for them. Yet this is what was done. People thought that since the second Brother, appointed to his position by De La Salle, was acting like the first, they were not doing so of their own accord but were simply following the lead of their Superior.

On such flimsy grounds, which a heart already persuaded took for proofs, the enemy of the servant of God felt that he was authorized to impute to the father the faults committed by his children. But to proceed against De La Salle with greater surety, he told the latest accuser, as he had the earlier ones, to set down his complaints in writing. He then summed up this and the previous denunciations in a memorandum to which he added his own comments. In this document, without calling the pious Founder the author of his disciples' conduct, the adversary blamed him for it and concluded that he should be deposed and someone else put in his place, someone with greater wisdom who was better able to govern the Brothers and to

take care of an Institute which was so useful to the Church. When the document was ready, he presented it to His Eminence and did not fail to add, in person, his other prepossessions and grounds for his hidden displeasure against a man whose only crime, in fact, was that he did not blindly follow his accuser's advice and did not let him run the new Society as he saw fit.[29]

## A report to the archbishop to have De la Salle deposed

The accuser was careful to back up all the accusations contained in the memorandum and to give them an air of verisimilitude. He imagined that there was sharp division among the Brothers and that many were disillusioned with their vocation. He sought a reason for this and found it in their Superior's lack of ability. He described him as a man inept for maintaining good order and peace and insisted that it was necessary to depose him. Since this was the result he really aimed at, he exhausted all his eloquence to lead Cardinal de Noailles to this conclusion. According to him, His Eminence would have to give the Brothers a new Superior immediately if he wished to save the Institute from total ruin.

The cardinal, however, was not given to precipitous action and was not ready to go so far. He found it hard to believe everything he heard, and he would have treated the document as a calumny and ordered it burned as a defamatory libel if it had come from any other hand than that which presented it. That accusing hand belonged to a man even more venerable for his virtue than for his age. He possessed the art of saying what he wished in a pleasant manner and with majestic simplicity; good faith, candor, and truth seemed to dwell in all his words. Everything in him inspired trust and deserved full confidence; his morals were irreproachable; his thinking was profound; he knew how to deal with the world while remaining a man of deep piety. His external appearance was imposing, and he displayed in everything an appearance of moderation and prudence which did not allow any sign of emotion to pierce through.

In this dilemma, the worthy prelate could not get over his surprise; the more he reflected on the accuser and the accused, the greater perplexity he felt. Whom should he believe? Obviously, either the one must be at fault, or the other was guilty of calumny. At least

29. Some see in this remark that despite his coy reticence, Blain makes it clear that the Founder's "secret enemy" was De La Chétardie, who wanted De La Salle replaced so that he could take over the government of the Institute.

he had to conclude either that the one was extremely prejudiced and led astray by false suspicions and biased reports or that the other had given occasion for the accusations against him. Charity did not allow him to charge the author of the memorandum with imposture and calumny or to believe him capable of bearing false witness against his neighbor. On the one hand, his great reputation and his real virtue placed him above any such suspicion. To tax him with passion, prejudice, imprudence, jealousy, resentment, and hidden spite—all veiled under the cloak of zeal—seemed highly implausible. His very looks gave the lie to any such suspicions; probity was written on his face. On the other hand, to believe that the accusations were correct and contained nothing but well ascertained facts was something that the prelate's deep regard for De La Salle would not allow him to do.

The reputation for holiness which everywhere followed a man who had condemned himself to a life of such poverty and mortification and who had made his name famous by so many examples of heroic virtue forbade the archbishop to listen to such accusations. He was surprised to see a man already considered a Founder, who had created a new Society and for the past twenty years had built it up and who had managed to preserve it from shipwreck amidst the most furious storms and constant tempests that had assailed it, treated as a man of limited ability and understanding, a victim of presumptuous and ill-considered piety. The cardinal, who had always thought that the servant of God possessed great talent for governing his house and had admired the fine order he saw there when he had visited it with the king of England, now remained uncertain in his mind about what he should believe and do. The decision he made, which was indeed the wisest course open to him, was not to judge the matter too hastily but to let time bring the truth to light.

The business was as ambiguous as it was delicate and called for precise information so as to discover exactly what was what. The cardinal therefore decided that he would look into the question, and the only answer he gave to the bearer of the memorandum was that he would reflect on what he should do. In fact, a few days later, he sent one of his vicars-general to conduct an on-the-spot investigation to find out all he could about what was going on.

To make matters worse, the complaints against the two Brothers in question reached the ears of De La Chétardie. The malcontents showed him on their bodies the welts left by the bloody disciplining they had received, and in exciting his compassion, they also excited his indignation. Although De La Salle was innocent, their story made him the principal object of De La Chétardie's wrath. Convinced that

the Brothers' Superior was the primary author of everything that went on among them, he attributed to him, as their first cause, the indiscreet and cruel penances complained about. This conviction changed his attitude toward the pious Founder. He no longer considered him with the same benevolence, lost all confidence in him, and went from the highest esteem to utter disregard, from the warmest friendship to the coldest indifference.

For a period of several months, he broke off completely with the Founder, sent his disciples away, and closed the schools. True, he took the Brothers back into his good graces sometime later, but he never restored to their worthy Superior his earlier confidence, his former protection, or his financial support which previously had always been forthcoming for the needs of the Community. In this way, the servant of God, abandoned by his best friend and the most zealous promoter of the Christian Schools, was obliged to seek refuge and better conditions in another parish, as we shall mention farther on.

Meanwhile, the archbishop, uncertain and troubled over what he should think of all this, took all the steps required to get to the bottom of the affair. To give himself firm grounds for his judgment, he resolved to establish a sort of inquisition on the spot where the faults had been committed. Monsieur Pirot was the investigator he deputed to look into the affair.

The vicar-general spent about a month gathering information. He came one day each week to observe what was going on and interrogated each Brother in private. In order not to be deceived and to force the truth out, so to speak, he obliged the Brothers to swear to tell the truth when they came to speak with him. This precaution may have been wise, but it was not necessary in a house where sincerity, candor, and respect for authority reigned. Men accustomed to accuse themselves of their shortcomings and to avow their least faults before the entire Community for the purpose of humbling themselves and drawing down on themselves confusion and shame did not need to take an oath to tell the truth. Children accustomed to admitting to their good father with naive simplicity the slightest evil motions of their hearts, revealing to him their lapses, and confiding to him their temptations and all the evil movements that vices, passions, and self-love might occasion within them were not men apt to speak against their consciences.

De La Salle had returned by the time these unusual occurrences began at the instigation of his hidden rival and enemy. He became aware of the inquisitorial tribunal which had been set up in the house but looked upon it with respect, a submissive heart, and an unruffled

and calm attitude. He did not know what had inspired all this, what was its origin and cause, and where it would lead, and he did nothing to find out. Self-love was so completely dead in him, as much as it can ever be on this earth in God's greatest servants, that it did not arouse in his soul any curiosity, complaint, or concern about all that he saw going on. His silence was truly admirable on an occasion when anyone else would have found it impossible to remain quiet. He did not mention to any of the Brothers what was taking place under his eyes. He asked none of them what was the matter, even though he could read the dissatisfaction in their faces, and it would have been easy for him to find out everything that was happening and to get them to admit to him what they had deposed under oath. He inquired about nothing.

His silence was imitated by his children, and his restraint kept them from disclosing to him that he himself was the one being investigated and that in all likelihood some humiliating decision was being reached concerning him. M. Pirot was careful to keep all the information given to him entirely secret. Nobody spoke about what transpired or about what was being said. No one mentioned the questions put to him or his own answers. No one was even tempted to try to find out, and if anyone had done so, his Superior would have imposed silence on him, so great was his veneration for higher authority.

The former professor at the Sorbonne, who alone was in charge of the investigation, did not delegate his responsibility to anyone else and did not associate anyone with himself in the inquiry he was conducting. He was the sole judge, the only witness, the accuser, and the court secretary. He wrote out in his own hand the statements he received and placed under solemn secrecy the various testimonials he so scrupulously gathered. He finally completed his visitation and his scrutiny without giving De La Salle any idea what it was all about or any reasons for such extraordinary proceedings. The facts collected by Pirot contradicted the report originally presented to His Eminence, except for the complaints signed by the three malcontents. Nothing in the memorandum was substantiated. In addition, the vicar-general stated how edified he had been to see the good order, peace, and union which reigned among the Brothers. He could not recognize in the house he had visited that hotbed of disorder, revolt, and discord which had been painted in such lurid colors.

Pirot, having found out the truth about the whole affair, was in a position to see for himself and to understand, through the depositions he had gathered, that the prepossession in the mind of the cardinal against the Brothers' Superior was nothing but a tissue of slanders.

Did Pirot ever state this? No one knows. His report remained as secret as his investigation had been, so that it is not possible to say whether his conclusions were for or against the pious victim of an evil tongue. If we may judge by what happened, it would seem that the investigator decided against the testimony of his own eyes and ears and instead gave credence to the accuser. He preferred to think that he had failed to discover the truth rather than to suspect the veracity of the accuser, a cleric who was above all suspicion and whose charges in assailing De La Salle were given great credibility, thanks to his personal merits, the authority he enjoyed in Paris, and his reputation, which nothing could counterbalance.

It seems, indeed, that the envoy was more impressed by the reputation of the holy Founder's adversary and the plausibility of his prejudices than by the facts, or else that he was not man enough to endorse the evident innocence of the accused in the face of the powerful enemy who attacked him. Or perhaps again—this is probably the fairest supposition and the one nearest to the truth—the investigator, relying on the complaints signed by the three malcontents against the two Brothers in charge, which were certainly substantiated, felt that this testimony compromised De La Salle, that he should be considered as the accomplice of the two guilty Brothers, and that as such, he should be demoted like them, deposed, and declared incapable of governing the new Community.

Even if De La Salle deserved some share of the blame merited by the conduct of his two appointees, it would seem that the degree of his responsibility was quite out of proportion to the chastisement which it was proposed to inflict on him and that before subjecting him to the disgrace of deposition, his superiors should have charitably warned him to moderate with due wisdom the corrections practiced in his house, to limit the use of penances, and to forbid all indiscreet ones. The authorities should have waited to see whether he would show himself docile in following their wise advice, and they should not have despaired of amendment on the part of a man who up to this time had never deserved reproof, either on this score or on any other. It was certainly surprising that on the strength of mere suspicions, they should have proceeded to dishonor a man who, just a few years previously, had been held in such high regard by the archbishop and whose virtues De Noailles himself had recognized when he approved all his requests for his Community and granted him full powers as regards the administration of the sacraments.

Even if it were true that De La Salle had introduced into his Community the type of penances which had given rise to the indiscretions

of the two Brothers in charge and to the complaints of two or three malcontents, the holy Founder could have justified these practices by appealing to the example of the holiest and most ancient religious orders. He could have found such examples as far back as the eleventh century in the famous monastery of Fonte Avellano in the diocese of Gubbio, whose superior was Cardinal Peter Damian, and in the constitutions of the Order of Mount Carmel, as well as in several others. Peter Damian himself relates, in his life of Saint Rudolph, bishop of Gubbio and one of the great penitents of his century, that among his other extraordinary austerities, when he came back to his fellow hermits of Luceola in Umbria, *he never came to the Chapter without taking the discipline there or having it administered to him; his joy was perfect when this was done to him, not only by one of the Brothers but by two.*

Peter Damian relates another fact of the same kind as that which caused the complaints of the dissatisfied novices but which turned out altogether differently. "In this same hermitage," he says, "there was a Brother who often left his cell for no reason, out of light-mindedness and lack of serious recollection. John, the prior of the hermitage, after having reproved him severely for this, had him soundly whipped. While the guilty one was putting his clothes back on, he spoke arrogantly, whereupon the superior ordered them to strip him and whip him again, which was done. This happened six times. Finally, when the Brother had for the seventh time received a severe whipping, he learned wisdom and said, as he was putting his clothes back on, *This time the devil is gone; he was the one who tormented my heart and controlled it; now he has been put to flight and leaves me at liberty. From now on, I will obey my superior.* Peter Damian relates that he himself made use of this kind of correction on a young religious who insisted on exaggerating the practice of abstinence. He also states, in chapter two of his life of Saint Dominic, *that this saint never failed, when he came to the Chapter, to strip and receive the discipline.*

The life of Saint Romuald provides us with a very strange instance of correcting faults by similar chastisements, for he made use of them on his own father. The latter, after retiring to a monastery to do penance for his sins, had made up his mind to leave it and return to the world. Saint Romuald, his son, on learning this, undertook a long journey to go to him, and having reached the monastery of Saint Severus, near Ravenna, where his father was, he made use of his authority as superior in his regard and resorted to a severity which seems surprising but which resulted in good. He ordered chains fastened to his father's feet and had him thrown into prison and beaten

severely. An action in itself so reprehensible was the occasion for an extraordinary enlightenment, as the sequel proved. Sergius, the father of Saint Romuald, came back to his senses, admitted his fault, received many special favors from God, and died a most edifying death. Cardinal Peter Damian tells us all this in his life of the saint.

In the General History of the Reform of the Discalced Carmelites, we read of something quite similar to what gave rise to the complaints we have mentioned. "One day," relates the historian, "the Père Vicar had left the convent of Our Lady of Perpetual Help at Altomir with a professed Brother, so there remained in the house only the novices and a lay Brother who had made profession and who, during the two days he governed the convent, arrogated to himself an authority as absolute as though he had been Superior General of the entire order. The very first day he was in charge of the community, he held the Chapter of faults, as was the custom, right after the collation; during it, he did not spare anyone but reproved each one according to his zeal and the light that God gave him.

"But so as not to omit anything which he considered the obligations of his position, he gave them an exhortation in which he reminded them of their duties. These acts of jurisdiction were not enough to satisfy the zeal of this good Brother who took his authority so seriously. With this in mind, he ordered all the novices to get ready to receive the discipline from him, and once they were prepared, he commenced laying the lash on their bare shoulders very vigorously, for the space of a *Miserere* and a *De Profundis*. These innocents received this harsh treatment with as much humility as though the lay Brother had been the provincial on his visitation and had wanted them to suffer in this way in penance for their sins. So far were they from wanting to murmur about it or complain, they did not even mention it to the Père Vicar on his return."

Here we see an instance of an occurrence which so inappropriately became the origin of the great persecution raised against De La Salle, but there were two differences. The first was that this sort of correction was customary in the Reformed Order of Mount Carmel and was authorized by the constitutions. The second difference was that those fervent novices in the hermitage of Altomir were so mortified that not one of them allowed himself to indulge in complaints and murmuring against the lay Brother whose indiscreet zeal had armed him with the discipline which he used so vigorously on his confreres. We can say, however, in excusing this good Brother, that in the absence of his superiors and of others who outranked him, he thought he was in charge of the monastery and therefore duty bound

to do what that office required and to do what the superior would have done.

In fact, the same historian, speaking of the strict observance that reigned in this Convent of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, established in the grotto of the Venerable Catherine de Cardonne, relates that on ferial days, at the end of Matins, the superior gave the discipline to all religious to make up for any negligence they might have been guilty of in reciting the Office. Everyone also knows that according to the Rule of Saint Benedict and the Canons of the Council of Agde, religious who were recalcitrant and disobedient were to be scourged and that because of his errors, the monk Gothescalq was condemned to this same penance by thirteen bishops at the council held at Quercy-sur-l'Oise in 849. Here is what the Council of Agde, held in the year 506, says in Canon 38: *Let the same be done to the monks, and if words do not suffice to correct them, let the lash be used on them.*

These examples show that even if it had been true that De La Salle had given occasion for these indiscreet penances which caused the complaints made against him by the two or three malcontents, his fault, caused only by an excess of fervor, would have been sufficiently remedied by the reproofs of his superior. It was, consequently, to fall into a much greater excess of severity than that which he was reproached with to make him expiate his fault by a shameful deposition. But according to the testimony of Brothers who lived nearly all the time with their holy Founder and who are still alive, he never gave occasion to these indiscreet penances, either directly or indirectly; he never authorized them or approved of them; they had taken place without his knowledge and in his absence. Was it right, then, that on a mere suspicion, he should have been accused of these excesses, reported to his ecclesiastical superiors, and condemned to removal from office on the grounds that he was a man given to exaggeration, lacking in common sense and knowledge of proper behavior? Yet this is what was done; this was the good turn that his former friend and protector did him, all under the pretext of piety and zeal.

# Chapter XIX

*De La Salle is condemned unheard; another ecclesiastic is chosen to take his place; Pirot comes to the novitiate house to install the new Superior and encounters invincible opposition from the Brothers.*

With the same tranquil attitude with which he had seen it conducted, De La Salle saw the visitation carried out by the vicar-general come to an end. He showed neither the slightest movement of curiosity about the reasons for it nor the slightest apprehension over its eventual outcome. Monsieur Pirot, who could not hide his coming and going from the Director of the house, had no trouble in keeping the purpose of his activity hidden from a man who never inquired into the motives of his superiors' behavior and who showed such marked respect for their actions.

This visitation took place during November 1702. Once it was over, the pious Founder thought that he should go to pay his respects to His Eminence and thank him very humbly for the attention paid to his Community. The prelate, who had not lost the basic esteem and affection he entertained for the servant of God, in spite of the malicious reports by which he had been circumvented, received him with his usual graciousness and marked tokens of friendship. So flattering a reception seemed to indicate a positive attitude toward the man of God and to presage a favorable outcome of Pirot's visit, while at the same time, it augured a continuation of the archbishop's goodwill.

It was at this point that his deep humility, blind submission, and perfect death to self appeared in De La Salle in all their clarity. This was one of those critical moments in the history of holiness, where true virtue is revealed in circumstances where imperfect virtue would allow its deficiencies to show. When a man is taken by surprise and sees himself, all of a sudden, the victim of calumny, injustice, and persecution, how easy it is for him to reveal himself a child of Adam by allowing his lips to form murmurs of protest against harsh and humiliating orders, of complaints against his open or secret enemies, or at least by permitting his heart to elicit movements of resentment and recrimination! On such mortifying occasions, how difficult it is even to the most virtuous persons not to show on their countenance some sign of chagrin and displeasure! How difficult it is to find oneself, at one and the same time, accused and condemned without knowing why, without having been convicted, even without having been heard!

## The archbishop plans to replace De La Salle as Superior

Even the greatest criminals hear the charges against them read out. Along with the sentence, the motives for their condemnation are stated, and the accused are not kept in the dark about crimes imputed to them which deserve punishment. But De La Salle was condemned without having been heard; he received from lips which had just been paying him gracious compliments the sentence by which he was deposed. He found himself disdainfully rejected by a kind and benevolent prelate who had always favored him and from whom he had received all the tokens of honor, esteem, and affection that a simple priest can expect from one of the highest-ranking princes of the Church.

At that moment, the servant of God realized that the archbishop must have been terribly misled and that slander, which finds its way even into the palaces of the great, had appeared plausible enough to circumvent the cardinal's religious spirit. Since his former friend and supporter was the secret enemy who had blackened his name in the prelate's eyes, De La Salle had no idea who was behind the story. He paid no attention to the secondary causes but adored God's action and listened in silence, with deep respect and gratitude, to Jesus Christ telling him through the mouth of the archbishop: *Monsieur, you are no longer the Superior; I am appointing another for your Community.*

These words, although accompanied by gentleness and politeness, nonetheless constituted a most humiliating condemnation. As much as to say, with all due proportion, what the prophet Ezekiel, in God's name, said to the impious King Sedecias, *Come down from your throne*;[30] take a lower rank. You occupy the first place, but it is not the right one for you. You are at the head of a Community which you are not fit to govern. Your own best interests and those of the organization which you have brought into being require that a different and wiser Superior be appointed to govern it.

The sentence of deposition, which His Eminence pronounced in a calm and moderate tone, included the hidden meaning of the commentary which we have just given of it, as it is easy to see in what preceded and in what followed. De La Salle was not a man who could fail to notice this and to feel it, and his full realization of what was happening added to the merit of his humble acquiescence in his own disgrace, an acquiescence as prompt as the verdict by which he

30. Ezekiel 21.

learned of it had been sudden and unforeseen. He could have asked for the reasons for his replacement and inquired who the enemies were that had recommended it. He could have demanded to be heard concerning the facts and the imputations. It would have been easy for him to justify his own conduct and to show that his removal from office was founded on nothing but false suppositions, on complaints which did not refer to him personally, and on faults which in all justice nobody could blame him for.

He knew that he stood before a judge, good and kindly by nature, who was condemning him in spite of himself, who would have gladly listened to what he had to say in his defense, and who, having always shown himself well disposed in his regard, must have felt in his heart a desire to be fair to him. But the humble Jesus, who had heard in silence his unjust condemnation as coming from his eternal Father and who had submitted thereto with the meekness of a lamb that is silent even when being sacrificed, had not taught him how to demand justice, how to present a vindication of his conduct. Instead, the servant of God, who wished to resemble his Master in all things, did not speak except to thank his judge, and after doing so with joy in his heart, a joy which showed on his face, he withdrew from the archbishop's presence, unruffled and happier than when he had come in.

After all, the crown they were taking from him was mostly a crown of thorns. The position of Superior of which they were depriving him had, up to then, brought him nothing but crosses, ignominy, and persecution, the only thing about it which made it attractive in his eyes. Anybody else would have found it unbearable; self-love could never have endured it. The cardinal could never have done the Superior of the Brothers a greater favor or one he more desired than by removing him from the government of his Community and entrusting it to someone else. His hidden enemy could not have rendered him a more signal service than by taking charge of the Community himself and putting him at his feet. This man, although so prudent and clear sighted, never seems to have realized that his attack favored what his rival treasured the most: his love for a humble and hidden life and his horror for the first place. How often had the humble Superior of the Brothers not tried to secure for himself the relief to which they were now condemning him in such a disgraceful way? A situation which made it possible for him to indulge his attraction for continual prayer and for solitude, penance, and union with God seemed to him a desirable anticipation of eternal repose.

When he got back to the community, he said nothing about what had occurred; he did not reveal to anyone the secret of his impending

disgrace. Not even among his dearest disciples did he seek a faithful confidant, not to obtain comfort, not even to express his joy over what had happened. He went instead to the feet of Jesus Christ to beg him to confirm by his authority the deposition that his minister had pronounced and to make it permanent. While awaiting the happy moment of his deliverance, which was not long in coming, the servant of God went about his business in the house as usual and did not allow his looks, words, or actions to afford anyone a hint or presage of what was going to happen.

## Pirot sets a date to install the new Superior

Pirot, wishing to complete his task on the spot where he had begun it and to carry out in person the sentence which he had placed in the mouth of the cardinal, sent a trusted messenger to tell De La Salle of the day he had chosen to go to install the new Superior and to have him acknowledged by the Brothers. This certainly was to put his virtue to the supreme test, or we might say that the vicar-general wanted to show forth this virtue in all its splendor by obliging his victim in person to open the door to his replacement. The archbishop's emissary must have been very sure of the submission of the guilty one, whose condemnation he had managed to bring about, when he ordered him to be present at the execution of the sentence which would remove him from his position as Superior. This confidence he felt was a testimonial of sorts to what he thought of the persecuted man's virtue. Did this not prove his innocence and justify his conduct?

The vicar-general was quite right in counting on the perfect obedience of the saintly priest, for he executed his orders with all the exactitude to be desired and did so, moreover, with a discretion and circumspection which showed that if he did not share the wisdom of the world, he was filled with that which comes from God. The only way Pirot's plan could succeed was to keep it a secret and not allow the least suspicion about it to take shape in the house. If the Brothers had the least inkling that they were being called together for no other purpose than that of witnessing the deposition of their own Superior, the vicar-general would not have found them as submissive as he hoped. It was even to be feared that sons so deeply attached to their father might reject any orders that would seem to them to be contrary to his honor and to their own best interests and that Pirot might compromise the archbishop's authority by trying to impose on them, in his name, a Superior whom they had not chosen, whom they did not even know, and who, as far as they were concerned, was a nonentity.

It was certain that Pirot, who during his visitation had found so much simplicity, candor, and submission among the Brothers, would see his visit end in scandal and confusion if he mentioned too soon the idea of giving them a stranger as their shepherd. If the saintly priest's humility made him indifferent to his public degradation, the love and confidence which the Brothers felt for him would never allow them to witness it. All of them would have been prepared to leave the house empty rather than to see another Superior installed there and their father disgraced. All the sheep were resolved to disperse rather than change shepherds or to leave the diocese and gather again in some other where they would be free to live under De La Salle's direction.

Since silence was so necessary for the success of the operation, the servant of God kept the project so secret and so well hidden that no Brother suspected what was afoot. Without telling them anything about the latest visit that Pirot was to make, the reason for it, or what its results would be, De La Salle took all the necessary precautions so that Pirot would be welcomed with the honor and respect due to his position, and he arranged for the Brothers to be gathered together, as though by chance, when the vicar-general arrived. So he sent word to those in Paris and to those who might have gone out for a walk to be sure to be present in the house after Vespers, without telling them why. This he said with an indifferent air which successfully avoided any curiosity or suspicion. Anyhow, the blind obedience toward their holy Founder which reigned among them did not permit them to make the least comment on his orders. The only point on which they would not agree to his desires was precisely the one on which Pirot would try to give them orders.

## Pirot tries in vain to have the Brothers accept the new Superior

If it had been easy to surprise them, it was not possible to change their hearts. Angry at having been deceived through their great simplicity, once they learned why they had been called together against their wishes, they resolved to be neither the instruments nor the witnesses of the shameful deposition of their Superior, whom they considered as their guardian angel. At first, they were greatly surprised when at four o'clock in the afternoon, after Vespers on the first Sunday of Advent, they heard the sound in the courtyard of a carriage approaching. They were even more surprised when they saw Pirot come in, accompanied by a priest whom they did not know. But what was their amazement when they learned from the lips of the vicar-

general that this unknown priest was the new Superior whom he had come to install in the place of their holy Founder!

Then, indeed, Pirot beheld unbelief written on their faces. Sorrow painted on their features informed him clearly enough that by bringing into it a new Superior, he was bringing strife into a house which until then had been quite tranquil and very united. As soon as he had taken his place in the armchair prepared for him, Pirot began explaining the purpose of his visit. In vain did he start by praising their former Superior before going on to praise the new one whom he was presenting to them. In vain did he strive to convince the Brothers to receive the new one with the respect due to the authority which had sent him. In vain did he try to win their confidence for the intruder; in vain did he attempt to inspire them with a liking for his person by reciting in glowing terms his extraordinary merits. In vain did he wish to make them hope that under a new type of government, they would enjoy a more comfortable life, to entice them by holding out the prospect of a more pleasant existence, less poor, less penitential, less constraining, under a less austere leader, one who would show himself more understanding and more indulgent toward human weakness. Their hearts were bound by the ties of their vocation and by the attractions of grace to him who had begotten them in Jesus Christ.

For their father, these men had the hearts of true sons. These disciples were convinced that their spiritual master was without peer in this world. They were not about to bestow their confidence on an unknown priest. These Brothers, accustomed to respect Jesus Christ in the person of their Superior and to follow the most difficult orders, were not inclined to revolt, resistance, or mutiny. So they sought a natural defense in their tears and attempted by their very humble remonstrances to ward off the execution of the sentence which Pirot had come to impose. At any rate, those who were not bound by vows knew that the door of the house was open for them to leave, and by leaving, they were glad to give the new Superior a chance to bring in new sheep to make up a new flock which might consent to be ruled by him and his new laws. Those who had made a vow of obedience to De La Salle considered this vow as a personal one binding them to him; they did not think they were under any obligation to pay the same submission to a chief who was not a member of their organization, whom they had neither selected nor asked for, who did not possess their unique spirit or ways, who was ignorant of their customs and procedures, who was not fit to maintain discipline and the Rule, who could not sustain the austerity required of them or give an example of it. All of them, without having agreed upon any one line of

conduct, had resolved to withdraw and to leave the new Superior alone in the house if the deposition of De La Salle was carried out.

However, since prudence had suggested to Pirot not to mention the change of Superior at first but to try to win over the hearts of De La Salle's disciples by praising him in front of them, he was listened to with much satisfaction as long as he spoke so highly of their holy Founder, as long as he said that it was an honor that God had chosen him to begin a work so useful to the Church and which he had guided so wisely up to the present. But then he took the laurel crown which he had just placed on the Founder's head and wanted to transfer it to that of the new Superior. He began to enlarge on the latter's qualities and virtues, and by a well-known oratorical device, he added that he did not dare to say in his praise all that he could have said, for fear of offending his modesty and humility. The vicar-general noticed, nonetheless, that the Brothers, who had heard the first half of his speech with great satisfaction, seemed much less attentive to the second and were not listening very willingly.

Still, he had to get to his conclusion, and since the purpose of the meeting was to install a new Superior, he had to indicate the one that His Eminence had chosen and the order to accept him. Here Pirot displayed his prudence once again, for without reading the text of the decree, he gave the gist of it cleverly and sought to prepare the hearts of the Brothers to assent to it with joy, saying that the person he was presenting to them deserved all their esteem and confidence and that they must show themselves obedient to him in all things. That word obedient was enough for men who were attentive and on their guard against the proposal the vicar-general had come to make. He had scarcely pronounced it when one of the principal Brothers respectfully went up to Pirot and in a modest tone told him that the Brothers already had a Superior and that they would be obliged if he would not mention giving them another. Pirot realized from this preliminary move that a scene was about to start, but because he was deeply involved in the affair and did not wish to lose the results of his investigation nor let the sentence remain unexecuted that he had convinced His Eminence to pronounce against his deepest wishes, he continued his talk without answering the Brother, gently motioned him aside, and sent him back to his place.

But the Brother, who spoke for the rest, remained calm and did not move. Without showing any irritation, Pirot then spoke more openly of the orders which he had come to transmit and of the Brothers' obligation to submit to them. The Community's spokesman repeated in a louder voice what he had just said more softly. The

former professor of the Sorbonne, accustomed to open contradiction in the schools, did not lose his equanimity but hastened to conclude a discourse which had for its purpose to get the Brothers to accept gracefully the Superior chosen for them and to promise him the same obedience as they had given to De La Salle.

But the other Brothers, fearing this very conclusion, hastened to drown out the words he was pronouncing. They joined the first Brother who had spoken up in their name. They were indignant over what they were hearing. They needed all their virtue to remain faithful to their duty and not show disrespect for the one who was haranguing them. Finally, their patience exhausted and unable to hold back their emotions, like children who see their father being torn from their embrace, they all lifted up their voices to protest the orders given them. They all cried out that they had no other Superior than De La Salle and His Eminence.

*De La Salle is the only Superior we desire; we will not have any other!* That was the only reply the vicar-general heard. The novices joined their voices to those of the older Brothers and added to the uproar with their additional numbers. All, with one voice, appealed against the sentence of the archbishop badly informed and to that of the archbishop better informed. They felt sure that if they were honored by being heard by so kind, benevolent, and just a prelate, they would obtain justice from him, since this was what he truly wanted, and that he would revoke his decision.

Pirot, interrupted by the cries and lamentations of these afflicted men, finally grew disconcerted by this unanimous demand of the children who wanted their father back. Surprised at finding such close union between the members and their head and at seeing in the disciples such a strong attachment to their master, he began to surmise the falsehood of the reports made to him concerning the lack of concord and subordination that was supposed to exist in the house, and he began to regret his excessive credulity.

De La Salle, a witness to this scene, was awaiting the happy moment when his deposition would put an end to it. He suffered more than the Brothers but for opposite reasons. What they feared, he desired. Appalled at their resistance to superior authority, he called for silence and, in his turn, spoke to the Brothers, trying to make them obey. Any other order that the humble Superior might have given them would have been carried out on the spot and to the letter, and Pirot would have learned from this submission of theirs that a man who could obtain such prompt and complete obedience was more capable of governing than he had been represented to be, but to accept

another Superior in his place was more than the Brothers could swallow; all of them felt they had a right to persist in their refusal. In their opinion, taking their Founder away from them was tantamount to destroying their Institute; it was like giving a guardian to children whose father was still living.

How cruel, they said, to tear from a mother's breast the babe she has brought forth, when she wishes to feed it and is capable of doing so! Who can have the grace to promote our work if its very author is supposed to lack it? Who will have the gift of guiding us if our Founder has lost it? When did the Spirit of God abandon him and turn to someone else? You want to change our Superior only to change our government, and you want to change our government only in order to introduce new laws, new ways, a new spirit among us, perhaps to soften our discipline and emasculate our austerity and spirit of penance. In a word, you want to make us soft, tepid, relaxed, unmortified. By trying to make us into a new type of men, you are really destroying us. If you take away from us the master who inspires us with the love of these virtues, who by his example sustains us in practicing them and by his prayers obtains for us the grace to imitate him, we shall cease being what we are: regular, set apart from the world, lovers of poverty, disciples of a crucified God.

It is useless, they told De La Salle, for you to appeal to your authority over us to oblige us to stop obeying you. In vain would you command us in the name of obedience not to obey you any more. It is because we want to obey you always and in everything that we refuse to obey you on this point. All of them protested that they would leave their state if their natural Superior was taken away from them.

Pirot saw that De La Salle had succeeded no better than he had. So he spoke again more forcefully, and to give his words even more respectable authority, he showed them and read aloud to them the decree of His Eminence, signed by him, which appointed the new Superior. This reading put the finishing touch on the consternation that reigned in the minds of the Brothers, added to their bewilderment, and did not hush the tumult. All of them were amazed that someone should have slandered their Superior to such a degree, and their astonishment was followed by indignation against the authors of this calumny and persecution. They felt they had a right to suspend their obedience to a decree which fraud must have secured from the lips but not from the heart of a prelate always ready to defend the innocent. They felt that they would be acting according to his true intentions if they refused to follow his orders.

At this point, the Director of Novices who by his imprudence had stirred up the storm which was breaking over De La Salle wanted to step in and plead for himself as well as for his Superior. Self-love could well have suggested this to him, since his conscience must have told him that he was the one guilty of the indiscretions which were being punished in the person of his innocent Superior. But he paid dearly for this liberty he took. This Brother should have humbled himself and publicly avowed his faults. He should have cried out that he was the Jonah who had provoked this tempest. He should have asked to be thrown out of the house or at least out of the novitiate. He should have begged to be punished with all rigor in order to calm the storm. He should have spoken in the posture of a criminal, asking pardon and a penance, and not have tried to act the part of advocate.

He did not do so for long, because although the vicar-general had kept cool up to then, he now felt his indignation arising. He silenced this indiscreet defender by reproaching him forcibly with being the source of the whole trouble and the main cause of all the disorder. The vicar-general's anger flared out, and with holy indignation he upbraided him in the impetuosity of his zeal: *What? You dare to speak? You, unworthy as you are of the responsibility which is yours!*

Monsieur Bricot, a tall young man from Lyon, was painfully surprised on seeing an occasion prepared for his glory turning to his confusion. Everything he saw and heard embarrassed him extremely. The new Superior chosen by Pirot and appointed by His Eminence found himself unanimously rejected by the Brothers. He felt quite disconcerted, as who would not have, in such awkward circumstances. Having come to witness De La Salle's deposition in order to replace him, he was mortified in no small degree by becoming a foil to emphasize the virtue of the master who was being lauded to the skies by all his disciples. And so, to put an end to a spectacle which had already gone on too long and of which he was heartily sick, Bricot wisely suggested to Pirot that they leave the Brothers the Superior whom they desired to have. All he wanted was to get out of a house whose keys could be handed over to him but not the hearts of its inhabitants.

The vicar-general, who had thought he could conclude this affair as easily as he had begun it, insisted on the execution of the sentence that he had read. He believed that his honor, as well as that of His Eminence, required that he not leave until it had been accepted. So he called upon all his learning to prove to the Brothers that they were obliged to accept and submit. Since these children, so firmly attached to their father, were not easily convinced that anyone had a right to

ask them to consent to his proscription and banishment, the former professor of the Sorbonne wasted his time and his arguments trying to demonstrate to the Brothers that they had to receive the new Superior, even at the cost of disgracing the incumbent.

The Brothers, in response, made use of all the talent they possessed in the art of eloquent speech to get the vicar-general to suspend the execution of the order he had come to enforce. They hoped to have time in that way to ask His Eminence to revoke it, convinced as they were that the archbishop would do so as soon as he learned that his confidence had been abused. This sort of debate between the vicar-general, who wanted to fulfill his commission before leaving and to install the new Superior, and the Brothers, who only asked for a chance to plead their own cause even more than that of De La Salle in the presence of Cardinal de Noailles, went on for over half an hour.

It seemed like an eternity to the Founder, who was the subject of it all and its unwilling witness. His countenance showed that he suffered more from the resistance of the Brothers than from the public affront which had been offered him by superior authority. As he infinitely respected all authority and welcomed its decisions as coming from heaven, he seemed ashamed at his disciples' appeals and requests for delays in the execution of an order which he found so much to his liking. Self-love in him experienced no joy whatever in this constant fidelity of his children; on the contrary, he felt deep affliction in his heart at not finding them as docile as he and as willing to accept his removal from office as he himself was. From time to time, he attempted to speak to reaffirm what Pirot was saying and to oblige the Brothers to end the discussion by the act of humble submission, but it was no use. On this point, the Brothers felt that they were dispensed from obeying him.

The very obedience which they had promised the Founder furnished them with an argument for disregarding his wishes. Since we have promised to obey you, they said, we are bound to subject ourselves to your control. This obligation brings another with it: to maintain you in the position of Superior. For if you are not at our head, whom shall we obey? We made a vow to obey you, not someone else. The very authority which wishes to impose a stranger on us to govern us in your place does away with our vow, leaves us free, and opens for us the door of a house where we remained because of our vow. If a vow is a free act and a deliberate choice, we have a right to refuse to obey anyone else as soon as anyone tries to tell us we must no longer obey him whom we promised to obey. And so, we recover our rights and our former liberty and declare that we wish to make

use of it by refusing a Superior who is being imposed on us in spite of ourselves and in whose regard our vow no longer obliges us.

Such language made Pirot understand that he could not convince men who based their resistance on principles of justice and religion and who invoked their vow of obedience made to De La Salle as a justification for their refusal to accept the new Superior. Consequently, after exhausting all his arguments, he finally left. On accompanying him to his carriage, De La Salle begged him to let time bring the Brothers around and assured him that he was positive he could make them do so and convince them to submit. "Don't promise him that!" was the instant reply of some who had resisted the hardest and who were quite excited. "Our decision hinges on our vow; the one depends on the other, and by the one and the other, the new Superior is excluded. If they force him into the house in spite of our opposition, he had better bring with him his own subjects who will obey him; he will find the place empty. We will all leave with the one we promised to obey."

This reply, more peremptory than the preceding ones, finally convinced the vicar-general that he could not succeed in winning over children whose father possessed their hearts. He even doubted whether time would ever change their attitude. All the steps he took later on were merely a sort of rearguard action intended to enable him to withdraw with honor from an engagement into which his blind confidence in De La Salle's persecutor had so unfortunately involved him. He was piqued, however, because his authority had been flouted. He made His Eminence believe that this discomfiture reflected on the archbishop's own authority and that he should make the refractory Brothers feel the weight of his displeasure. But what could he do? When he has overstepped the bounds of a legitimate use of his authority without success, how can this be remedied? Is there any way of making people knuckle under, when by changing their residence, they can avoid the person in authority and seek a different Superior for themselves?

This, then, was what that man so zealous for God's work had gained, that man who felt that the project was not safe in De La Salle's hands and that the Institute needed another leader to insure its safety. He had believed his own illusions, and that was why he deceived himself. His prudence was as shortsighted as his zeal was mistaken. Both of them proved to be deceitful guides which led Pirot into a labyrinth he did not know how to get out of. After much reflection, it appeared evident to him that things had to be left as they were.

There were really only two alternatives: either destroy the new Institute or leave its government in the hands of its Founder. To do

away with an institution visibly inspired by God, so useful to the Church, and so necessary for poor children was a violent and pernicious solution which the cardinal and his counselors could not accept. Even the man behind the accusations directed against De La Salle would have protested against such a decision, for he had great esteem for the Christian Schools. The only reason that he had caused all the uproar against the servant of God was that he was actuated by erroneous prejudices and felt that the Founder was not capable of bringing his creation to its full perfection. But even he preferred to let De La Salle retain his position rather than to see the whole work ruined; this would have made him inconsolable. A man of such deep piety would not have been able to survive its ruin; he would have died of sorrow if he had felt that he alone was responsible for sinking it.

Finally, everybody agreed that even if it were true that De La Salle did not govern his Community in the most desirable fashion, it was better to let it continue to thrive under his direction than to see it destroyed by removing him from office. The whole difficulty lay in finding a way to save appearances and to secure for legitimate authority the respect due to it and the tokens of submission which had to be obtained from the Brothers, while leaving them in possession of their rights and the Superior they wanted. To succeed in such a delicate task called for a man as prudent and enlightened as De La Chétardie. He undertook it and brought it to a satisfactory conclusion, as we shall soon see. In these negotiations, he secured the help of Monsieur Madot, today the bishop of Châlons-sur-Saône.

## Chapter XX

*The tumult subsides; De La Salle remains in his position; the Brothers remain as they were, and peace is made with them and the chancery, but the persecutor, not having succeeded by making accusations to the ecclesiastical superiors, adopts another equally dangerous stratagem, namely, to sow discord among the Brothers and to inspire them with disaffection for their Superior and his way of governing them.*

This last visit of Pirot to the novitiate house had caused more commotion than his previous ones. It finally became known in Paris why the former professor at the Sorbonne had carried out his investigations. People also found out what little success had accompanied the

intrigues so artfully contrived, and they began to suspect who the author of these maneuvers was. This information gave De La Salle's true friends and those who showed an interest in his work an opportunity to take the measures necessary to undeceive His Eminence and to counterbalance at the chancery office the influence exercised there by the enemy of the servant of God. This we learn from a letter that the parish priest of Villers, in the diocese of Paris, wrote about this time to a parish priest in Laon, in Picardy. Here is a copy of this letter.

"I was no less surprised and concerned than you were, Monsieur, at the news you gave me about De La Salle. As I honor and esteem him no less than you do, I have taken and still take all the share one can in the affliction that has been caused him. I did myself the honor of calling on him. It is impossible to be more edified than I was at his constancy, his firmness, his perfect resignation, and his entire abandonment to Providence. I will not be telling you anything new in speaking to you of his virtues, for your knowledge of his rare merit does not date from yesterday.

"I have seen the cardinal and Monsieur Pollet. I hope that with time, His Eminence will get over the impressions given him against De La Salle. Quietism has nothing to do with the matter. He was simply accused of being too austere toward the Brothers, of making use of exaggeratedly rigorous penances, and of being so strongly attached thereto that he did not want to reduce them in any way. An attempt was made to make him appear to the cardinal as incapable of guiding others and especially as a man extremely wedded to his own opinions who conducts himself and the Brothers by his own lights alone. His great crime, from what I have been able to ascertain, is that he does not conform to the opinions of ***.[31]

"That person would like to take over the government and the interior direction of the Brothers, but this is what De La Salle has not been willing to let him do up to now. I do not know how this affair will end, for you know well enough the mentality that characterizes ***, the main adversary of De La Salle. If De La Salle were willing to accommodate himself to ***, he would have no problems at the archdiocesan chancery. Two or three novices left his novitiate, complaining of the ill-treatment they were supposed to have received there. Monsieur *** inflated their complaints, conducted investigations, wrote a memorandum, and presented it to His Eminence. Upon this, the cardinal appointed Pirot, one of his vicars-general, to make a visitation of

31. In a copy of this letter in the Rome archives, in place of the three asterisks, the text reads, "the parish priest of Saint Sulpice."

the house and to interrogate the Brothers. He did pay three or four visits for this purpose, and on his last appearance, he brought along M. Bricot, whom His Eminence had sent to be their new Superior.

"On hearing this word, Superior, all the Brothers protested that they already had one, De La Salle, and that they recognized none other than him and His Eminence. After this, Pirot departed. Since then, various meetings have been held privately at Pirot's residence, involving De La Salle and several of the Brothers. Finally, eight days later, Pirot came back to De La Salle's house with the new priest and spoke to the Brothers. He made them a thousand promises, among others that nothing would be changed, that they could always keep their Rule, and that De La Salle would not be taken from them. But he also made it clear that they must obey and accept M. Bricot as their Superior. He added that they would always enjoy the consolation of having De La Salle with them and that the priest would come to the house only once a month. They accepted him on these conditions, or at least they did not object as they had done the first time. And if the proverb is true which says that *silence gives consent*, they would seem to have consented to the appointment of this priest, since none of the Brothers said a word.

"This is how things stand at the moment, but nobody believes the situation can last very long, and it is hoped that all this will not lead to any untoward consequences. A first step has been taken, and we shall try to keep up the momentum for a while. All that can be done now is to look for favorable opportunities to undeceive His Eminence and to stress all the qualities of De La Salle. This is what I have already begun doing and what I shall continue to do on all the occasions that Providence may give me. I owe him that much in justice. In addition, the interest that you take in what concerns him makes me all the more eager to act in this way with all possible zeal."

This letter clearly shows the motives behind the accusations formulated against De La Salle and what weight should have been attributed to them. His crime consisted in not wanting to relax the rules he had established for his Community after consulting the Brothers. The disunion said to exist among them was clearly shown to be a hoax by the unanimous concurrence of their voices and sentiments, which showed that they all had but one heart and one soul. Indeed, Pirot, although irritated over the lack of success which had attended his mission and over the opposition by the Brothers to his orders, could not help doing them justice and saying, when he reported to His Eminence, *If all inferiors were as attached to their superiors as the Brothers are to De La Salle, their communities would be like paradise,*

*and only saints would be found in them.* He added that he had tried in vain everything that his learning and experience had suggested to influence them and to make them consent to the change of Superior. The more he had tried to detach the children from their father, the closer he had brought them together.

On hearing this report, the cardinal began to see that he had been taken in and that he should not have so readily lent himself to the machinations of a pseudo-zealot. He had been right in not wanting to get involved in the condemnation of a man whom he had always held in high esteem and in being reluctant to issue the sentence against him on the strength of the accusations made and the reputation of the accuser. He also felt that the proceedings against the innocent criminal were odious and had been carried out with too much vigor and precipitation. In the depths of his heart, he was not happy with his vicar-general for getting him involved in this affair and for not having succeeded, despite all his investigations, in discovering the falsehood of the accusations made against the servant of God. All these reflections put the archbishop in a bad humor, and because he felt embarrassed, he retained a certain lack of sympathy for the new Community. He found it extremely odd that mere Brothers delayed in accepting his orders and that they resisted his vicar-general.

Ultimately, the dishonor in this whole sorry business fell upon the one who had promoted it. He should at least have opened his eyes and recognized that he had made a mistake in imagining that De La Salle did not possess the art of governing his Community and, still less, the ability of making himself loved. He should have realized that he had made another mistake in thinking that the new Community was filled with a spirit of discord and that the Brothers were disenchanted with their vocation. The events should have made him see that he had been wrong in blaming an absent Superior for the errors of two indiscreet disciples and that he should now try to repair in the estimation of the archbishop the honor of the man whom he had defamed through excessively eager zeal and thoughtlessness. How, then, was it possible for such an enlightened man to delude himself still and not to see that it was his duty to calm the tempest that he had provoked?

That was indeed something astonishing, but is it not only too common that those who are so prudent in their own eyes, who think that all wisdom is lodged in their heads, actually lack it? They dishonor themselves by lack of discretion and by very real, palpable errors of conduct, while they reproach shadows and appearances of evil in the greatest of God's friends.

Such was the disposition of the man we are speaking of. The failure of his intrigue only confirmed him in his opposition to De La Salle. Filled with prejudice, he did not think he had been mistaken, nor did he consider that he had deceived anyone. Acting in good faith and for what he conceived to be the greater good, he felt no remorse. Not only did his conscience, which was at peace over all the uproar he had caused, not reproach him with any fault, but it provided him consoling testimony to his uprightness and flattered him that he had sought only God when he was trying to remove De La Salle from his own house. Thus, not discouraged over this initial setback that his schemes had met with, he cleverly made use of this very circumstance to reach his goal.

He insinuated to His Eminence that the Brothers' opposition to the orders given them had been fomented by the very man who wanted to keep his position. It was a skillful ploy and quite capable of inspiring the most powerful prelate in the kingdom with the determination to push to the wall these simple, guileless men, these children whose only fault was that they loved their father and did not want to subscribe on the spot to his condemnation but hoped that a delay might dissipate the shadows of calumny and, sooner or later, bring his innocence to light. At any rate, if this new accusation did not win full belief, it did succeed in part. If the cardinal did not accept it entirely, the world listened to it. The word got around to the public and disposed the credulous against the Brothers and against their Superior. It was even said that the parliament had wished to look into this affair to oblige the Brothers to make full amends to their primary ecclesiastical superior or to punish them if they refused. De Noailles, however, who in his heart had not lost the high esteem he felt for the virtue of De La Salle, prevented any such steps from being taken.

It addition, it was in vain that the author of this intrigue tried to hold De La Salle responsible for the resistance of the Brothers to Pirot. The cardinal realized that De La Salle was entirely innocent on this score. This unfounded suspicion was completely contradicted by Pirot's own report of what had happened in his presence as a witness both to the humility and submission of the servant of God and to his efforts at getting his disciples to show prompt obedience to episcopal authority. In the process of accusing the Brothers, he had exonerated their Superior. He testified that De La Salle had used all the influence he possessed over his disciples to get them to submit but that he had been silenced by their unanimous reply that they would all leave if another Superior was imposed on them. At the end, when he was leaving, the vicar-general had heard the promise made by De La Salle

that he would get the Brothers to obey, and he had also heard this statement contradicted by them with a promptness which showed that their mouths spoke from the abundance of their hearts. This, too, made it impossible for him to admit the new accusation.

For his part, the holy Founder had never found himself in such an embarrassing situation. Although he had seen his Community seriously compromised in the past, never had it been so close to complete ruin as now. What could he do to shore it up again and to preserve it from total destruction? He no longer had any valid title, and he lacked all authority. If he yielded to the remonstrances of the Brothers, who wanted no other Superior, he would become a rebel, usurping a position he was forbidden to occupy. If he left the house, the Brothers would follow him. In such a delicate situation, not sure of what he should do, De La Salle consulted heaven and abandoned to God the defense of his cause. On the one hand, he dreaded seeing the work which had cost him so much suddenly overthrown; on the other, he felt consoled in remembering God's help, which had so often upheld him in the frequent attacks of the world and of hell. Thus he wavered between fear and confidence. After much prayer and serious thought, persuaded that the cardinal's intentions were of the best, he felt he could put his trust in the prelate's goodness. All he needed to do was to dissipate the unfortunate impressions made on De Noailles and, especially, to offer him humble reparation for what had happened.

## The cardinal rejects De La Salle's attempt to apologize

This did not seem impossible to the servant of God. For one thing, the archbishop must have realized that he had been duped, and he might regret having lent too willing an ear to false reports. He did not approve the way his representatives had proceeded against the servant of God. He was even credited with having said that they had pushed this affair too hastily and had not taken all the measures prudence required to conclude it without so much public outcry. At the same time, a man as humble as De La Salle did not hesitate to seek humiliations. He was always ready to assume the posture of a repentant criminal, to feel like one, and even to take upon himself the blame for the faults of his disciples. With this in mind, he prostrated himself at the feet of his archbishop, and with tears in his eyes, he sought to offer him reparation for the refusal of the Brothers to accept their new Superior. He begged the cardinal not to think that he had anything to do with this. Protesting that he had made every effort to

cause the Brothers to pay blind and prompt obedience to His Eminence, he called on Pirot and Bricot to vouch for the truth of what he was saying.

The cardinal, who was leaving for Conflans,[32] remained silent when he saw De La Salle at his feet. Did he feel touched by the sorrow and humiliation of this saintly man? Did the pain he himself felt over all that had happened make it impossible for him to speak? The holy priest remained prostrate on his knees in the presence of a crowd of people who felt sorry for him, and still the archbishop did not address him a single word. Then, turning, he left without a word, whether out of indignation or of commiseration which robbed him of speech, while the servant of God remained there, his lips still in contact with the floor which he bedewed with his tears.

## The Brothers try to soften the attitude of De La Salle's enemy

On his return home, De La Salle said nothing about this new and shameful treatment, this fresh affront which he had just received. He abandoned his cause and that of his disciples to God and recovered his habitual serenity. No one ever saw him looking morose or disturbed over what would happen, and the only advice he gave the Brothers who went to consult him was to urge them to obey.

Five or six days went by in this way. During this time, the Brothers in Paris, who had not been included in Pirot's investigation, because they were busy in school, conceived a plan for warding off the impending storm by trying to appease the person who had stirred it up. They knew that although he had been indisposed toward De La Salle for some time, he had not lost his appreciation for the Institute, and they hoped to make him change his mind about their Founder. The undertaking was a bold one, for they ran the risk in this visit of drawing down on themselves also the ill will of a man who knew how to disguise his prejudices in the most glowing colors. The Brothers were well aware of this. They were about to engage in a struggle with a giant whose arguments they could not refute, whose presence they could not withstand.

Nevertheless, after fasting on bread and water the day before their visit and having spent the night in prayer, one after another, on their own initiative, and without informing De La Salle, they went to see his redoubtable adversary. As prudent men, they kept their resentment hidden, affected ignorance of his schemes and intrigues, and

32. It seems that he was going hunting with the royal court.

showed him much confidence. After this beginning, they came to the point and explained the resolution they had all formed of leaving the house if they saw any Superior there other than De La Salle. In conclusion, they begged him to make use of the great influence he enjoyed at the diocesan chancery to obtain the revocation of the order given them to acknowledge as their shepherd a stranger whom they did not know and who did not know them, instead of the one who had first communicated to them the spirit of grace.

It would have been hard to pay a less welcome compliment to a man who had not given up his project. Although he was vexed to the heart by this visit and by what the Brothers said, he did not dare show it. They had come to beg him, as a favor in order to keep De La Salle in his place, to make use of the influence which he had so recently employed in order to put him out! They were asking him to undo what he himself had done and to play the role of intercessor after that of accuser. They were taking away from him all hope of succeeding in what he aimed at, and this they did very adroitly by displaying inviolable fidelity to his rival. Thus they were shutting in his face the doors of a house which he sought to enter only to dominate everybody in it.

He and De La Salle would have quickly come to terms, if the servant of God had been willing to consult him and follow his advice in everything and to let him run the affairs of the Community as he wished. If the Founder had agreed to take him as his master and to become his docile disciple, all he needed to do was to present himself before him and vow to obey him; then he would have seen his erstwhile persecutor become his protector. In the long run, the Brothers' remarks were for De La Salle's antagonist a silent reproach for his unfounded prejudices and suspicions, his talebearing, his disloyal behavior, and his intrigues. They were intended to make him admit his faults and repair them by inviting him to go to the archbishop to try to undo what he had done. This simple and naive discourse, which exteriorly showed so much esteem and confidence in him, possessed a fund of hidden eloquence. It obliged the persecutor to lay down his arms.

Indeed, with reference to the substance of what they told him, he could adopt only one of two possible alternatives: either proceed with the total destruction of the Institute or else refrain from interfering with the Founder in carrying out his proper role. Now, he had too much religious spirit, too great a sense of responsibility to be tempted to follow the first course. His piety would have felt deep regret were he to see the ruin of an Institute he thought so highly of. And

so, although highly displeased over what the Brothers said, he pretended not to seem so.

Convinced that he would not arouse among the Brothers anything but dissension while De La Salle still possessed their hearts, he saw clearly that the only thing for him to do was to yield and to wait for a more favorable moment for detaching from De La Salle these disciples who clung so firmly to him. Even in this, however, he could see his own schemes failing, because he had based his intrigue on the supposed dissatisfaction the Brothers felt against their Superior. He thought that they were sinking under the burden of the inhuman yoke that the latter was imposing on them and that they would be delighted to throw it off. Now he realized his mistake. All that had happened, along with what the Brothers had just told him, made him understand how badly he had misread their dispositions. This realization filled him with confusion over having pushed things too far on the strength of an unjustified suspicion and having so imprudently compromised the archbishop's authority, which he had succeeded in winning over to his own warped views.

The scheme which had failed immediately suggested another to achieve his end of getting rid of De La Salle. This consisted, first of all, in trying to sow among the principal Brothers a certain diffidence toward their Superior, to make them critical of his behavior, and to dispose them against him personally. Next, it consisted in stirring up against him outside enemies on every hand, so that assailed from within and from without, he might be obliged to give way and withdraw of his own accord. This, in fact, is what happened later, as we shall see.

To start the first sort of attack, clever as he was and skilled in dissembling and assuming the mask he wished to use, he appeared satisfied when he had heard the Brothers. At first, he had received them with fire in his eyes, a harsh look on his face, and a forbidding and angry air. But then, assuming a gentler tone and a more gracious aspect, he said to them with a show of simplicity: "You can't be serious! You are really too naive! De La Salle is an arbitrary leader whom you placed over yourselves or who, rather, has put himself at your head to govern you. He has no ecclesiastical jurisdiction over you; he is not a religious superior. Who made him your judge and your shepherd? By what authority does he set himself up as your master?" The Brothers could have replied that Monsieur de Harlay had given him permission to set up his Community, that Monsieur de Noailles had confirmed this in writing and had fully empowered him to act as their Superior. Thus this initial approach was refuted, but let us go on. The enemy of

the servant of God continued: What a mess you have made of things! You practically spat in the face of the vicar-general. What can I do now? He promised them, however, that he would set to work to try to reconcile all parties.

## A mediator is appointed to appease both sides

Not wishing to leave things half done, the Brothers thought that they should also see the parish priest of Saint Sulpice and try to get him on their side. It is true that at this time, De La Chétardie was strongly prejudiced against De La Salle and no longer showed himself toward the Founder what he had formerly been. During the first few years, no man had ever seemed more zealous in supporting the Founder and his Institute. The pastor had declared himself its patron, defender, and financial supporter. By this time, however, God allowed it to happen that De La Chétardie had lost practically all his esteem for a man whom he considered a sort of religious fanatic, entirely wedded to his way of looking at things and, in addition, possessed of very limited ability and a tendency to exaggeration.

Still, he had not lost his interest in the Christian Schools nor his zeal for them. If it had been a question solely of the Brothers' Superior, he would not have lifted a finger to halt the persecution against him and would have left him to extricate himself as well as he could from the embarrassing situation in which he had been entangled. In reality, he would not have been sorry to see in the position of Superior someone else who would show himself more accommodating, less austere and rigorous, more accessible, more yielding to the world's ways, and more open to the good advice given him for the proper government of his Community and for the good of his work.

But the future of the Christian Schools, in which the parish priest of Saint Sulpice was deeply interested, was also involved. His clear-sightedness showed him what had happened, and he knew from the Brothers' attitude that it would be necessary either to accept the overthrow of their Society or to let their Superior remain in his position. So this great friend of what was good, this sincere promoter of the Christian Schools, thought he should use his influence to find a solution to this impasse which would save the honor of His Eminence while turning to the advantage of the Institute. It was quite an undertaking, and the means for succeeding in it were not that obvious. To do so took a man as influential and wise as De La Chétardie.

No one knows what arrangement he sought to resolve the problem. The task was delicate, and to bring it off successfully, he had to

leave the Brothers their true Superior and yet oblige them to make amends for having refused the new one. These two requirements seemed difficult to reconcile, yet it was necessary both for the archbishop's honor and authority and for the benefit of the Brothers to have the agreement approved by the archbishop and by the Community. De La Chétardie undertook the task and finally succeeded, although we do not know exactly how he managed to do so.

All we do know is that he convinced Abbé Madot to take this thorny problem in hand. At this time, Madot was a member of the community of Saint Sulpice. Since then, he has been raised, thanks to his rare merit, to the episcopal see of Châlons-sur-Saône. The matter could not have been placed into more skillful hands. Madot had a keen and fertile mind, the talent of speaking well, and the ability to win hearts. Four days after the visit the Brothers paid to the parish priest, Madot came alone in his carriage, at seven in the morning, to the novitiate at the Grande Maison. It was the feast of the Immaculate Conception of the Most Blessed Virgin. Madot wished to look into the hearts of the Brothers, so to speak, and sound out their minds, so as to tailor his proposals for a reconciliation according to the attitudes he found among them.

Nothing was more prudent. What the negotiator wanted to do was to bring the Brothers to submit purely and simply to the archbishop's orders. But if he could not win their consent to this, he had thought of a compromise which might make them get to the same point indirectly. This was to promise them that De La Salle would be left in his position if they acquiesced in whatever His Eminence decided. If he found them too suspicious and on their guard because they feared that after their act of total submission, the fulfillment of the promise might not follow, his final resource was to offer them a conditional submission. This last alternative was one he did not wish to propose except as a last resort, but he was firmly resolved not to yield beyond this point. He was determined to bring the Brothers to it and to convince them to accept the conditions of peace and the promise of pardon that would be necessary.

Madot spent four whole hours in his negotiations. He spoke gently, pleaded, remonstrated, advised, and cajoled. There was no type of blandishment he did not use, no type of argument he did not advance, no inconveniences he did not point out and paint in vivid colors. Never did he show to better advantage the gift of eloquence that heaven had granted him. He did not preach, nor did he, in carrying out the mission he had received, make any use of this talent which he enjoyed to such a remarkable degree. It was probably because he

feared he would call in vain upon his oratorical talent before a Community so firmly together. He hoped to influence them more easily by speaking with each member in private.

He entered the house but did not call the Brothers together by having the bell rung. He stopped them wherever he happened to find one, as though without any preconceived design, and tried to win from them in these informal talks what he would not have been able to obtain from them in a public encounter. He spoke to the ones he met; he conversed with one or two; then he joined a couple of others to them; he went somewhere else and got three or four more together. Thus moving about the house, he met with all the Brothers and spoke to them all, telling them either the same things or something different, as prudence suggested. In these conversations, where minds and hearts could meet and dialogue with less constraint and circumspection, he showed himself even more eloquent than he was in the pulpit.

He made a simple and natural use of every rhetorical device, of every trick of the orator's trade. Now he deplored what had happened to De La Salle; now he grew compassionate over his lot and that of the Brothers. To some, he depicted in somber colors the terrible consequences of their refusal to submit entirely; to others, he offered wise advice on how to protect themselves from the impending storm. With some, he commiserated over the afflictions of their father and admitted that his removal from office would cause serious dislocations. With others, he had recourse to remonstrances; he made them realize that their duty should take precedence over their attachment to De La Salle. To all, he stressed the veneration due to episcopal authority. By describing the power of the prelate whom they had confronted, he sought to inspire them with fear of his displeasure, and by portraying His Eminence, in conclusion, as a mild and gentle person, he made them hope for all sorts of favors if they complied with his directions. Finally, he pictured the ruin of their Institute and the lamentable fate awaiting their Founder if they obstinately insisted on keeping him as their Superior against the cardinal's orders.

By eleven o'clock, Madot found that he had not made much headway after all these private conversations. He had not yet said Mass, and he had to hurry if he wished to do so. Annoyed but not discouraged, he seemed to wish to conclude the business by proposing to have his offers discussed publicly. The silence of the Brothers and their lack of reaction made him understand that he had to sing a different tune or, at least, to modify what he had said up to then by proposing conditions or offering promises which would reassure them

about their situation, let them keep their rules safe from all innovation, and leave the Superior in his rightful position.

## How Madot finally succeeds with the Brothers

This was his last card, and he reserved it for the end, after having played all the others in vain. Abbé Madot, who had kept this proposal hidden up until then—and wisely so—finally came out with it, as though offhand. "Brothers," he said, "Monsieur de La Salle will not be taken away from you. It is only to protect you that you are asked to receive the new Superior, so that you can honor the order you have received and show due respect to the legitimate authority which sends him to you. This new Superior will, moreover, be such in name only and will not exercise the functions of that office. He will come here only once a month. What have you to fear from such rare visits by a man who will leave behind in the house, when he enters and when he leaves, no vestige of his passing? Nobody will touch either your regulations or your community practices. Bricot will respect everything that is established, will leave everything just as he found it, and De La Salle will remain undisturbed in his place."

This promise was presented as though it were a slip of the tongue of the prudent priest, who had calculated his words well and had kept this proposal as his last resource, ready to use it or not as the occasion might warrant. It had the effect that he hoped it would. This was, so to speak, his secret weapon which he would call upon only in case of necessity. And even so, to make it effective, he had to keep it hidden until the proper moment. He did this with great skill, so that the stroke went straight to its target and apparently solved the problem. *Why didn't somebody tell us this before?* asked one of the Brothers, with a simplicity as natural as Madot's had been calculated and adroit. *Why was this not made plain when they brought this priest here? And why did you yourself, Monsieur, take so long to get to the point in telling us?*

The fact was that His Eminence, as we mentioned before, had not approved of the tactics used by his vicar-general. To him, they seemed rather overbearing and lacking in appropriate measure, more apt to irritate than to win submission. *You went about it in the wrong way*, the archbishop had said. *You should not have tried to prevail by main force; attempting to dominate people only embitters them. When one wishes to bring men under a new yoke, persuasion must be used, not commands. The human heart instinctively tends to fight back when anyone seeks to constrain it. At all times, mildness has won what*

*could not be conquered by force. Authority becomes odious when it is carried too far, and one compromises it when one uses it in an extreme manner. This you have discovered through your recent experience.*

Abbé Madot felt that he was gaining ground and that the hearts of the Brothers were beginning to yield. Like the clever man he was, he took advantage of the opening he had found in order to insinuate his project into their minds. First, he won over two or three. These persuaded others, and eventually he had convinced twelve of them. The others refused to give in, fearing some sort of trick. They were afraid of agreeing to anything which might, later on, turn to the prejudice of their Institute and serve as a key for Bricot to take over their house and expel De La Salle from it. But Madot thought that with the dozen he had convinced, he was in a sufficiently strong position. He would present them to the vicar-general as the representatives of the others and thus seem to bring him the consent of the entire Community. In order not to give them time to reconsider, he hastened to have them leave the house and come along with him to Pirot at the Sorbonne, where they would offer him humble amends and make a declaration of their perfect submission.

"Come with me," he told them, "and offer your excuses to the vicar-general. He was shocked when you refused to listen to his orders; he has a right to some satisfaction on your part. He would be scandalized if you delayed in asking his pardon. And do not do things by halves. By showing him your entire submission, dissipate the reasons he has for being displeased with you. Thus, you will recover his good graces, you will appease the archbishop, and you will dispose him to leave De La Salle in his position and your house in peace."

He had already entered his carriage with De La Salle and one of the Brothers, who could not walk, and was ready to lead these men, like captives in triumph, to the feet of the vicar-general, when one of the Brothers, a bit more distrustful than the rest, began to realize that they were about to give up all they had gained without having received anything positive in return. So he called them all back to reconsider the matter. *What are you about to do?* he asked them. *You are about to oblige yourselves but to what? We need to know. What have you been offered? We need to present our demands and to make sure that these promises we just heard are set down in writing in the same act that spells out the concessions you are about to make. And let it all be signed.*

Abbé Madot thus saw himself once more at the point which he had so cleverly avoided and from which he had so skillfully distracted

the attention of the Brothers, who had at first wished to pin him down to it. Without growing disconcerted and with that frank and open air which wins the confidence of simple people of good faith, he begged them to count on his word and to trust him. No doubt, if he had spoken in this way when he first came in, instead of getting to this point by degrees, like a man obliged to come down little by little toward those whom he cannot bring up to where he stands, he would have succeeded more easily with men who do not begin to grow suspicious until someone begins to deal with them in a less than straightforward manner.

Because the Brothers noticed that Madot had offered these promises only after he had tried, for four hours, all other means of convincing them and of bringing them to submit purely and simply, they remained on their guard and showed their mistrust of his proposals. In order not to be dupes of their own simplicity, they all agreed that before they would leave, a statement should be drawn up and signed, spelling out the conditions they meant to attach to their submission. The clever negotiator found himself once more in difficulty. He was unable to get out of the impasse without agreeing to their demands. Seeing that they put no trust in words, which fly away, and that they wanted something in writing to guarantee what was being agreed, he was forced to give in; if not, his mission would have failed entirely.

With this sort of contractual guarantee, the Brothers hastened to go to the office of the vicar-general; they arrived there almost as soon as did the carriage in which the official delegate rode. They were prepared to offer any kind of satisfaction to a superior authority which they had always deeply respected and to beg pardon for a fault in which, in fact, they felt themselves before God to be completely innocent. There was no sort of humiliation, excuse, or reparation to injured honor which they were unwilling to offer, provided nothing should be modified in their regulations and provided they could keep their Superior. On these two points, they remained adamant, and the most virtuous among them considered it a sacred duty not to give in.

We must not hold this against them, because they were community men. The more such men are attached to their rules, the more their conscience will protest against the slightest relaxation. The more virtuous they are, the firmer they show themselves in preserving the initial fervor of their vocation. Yes, these children deserve pardon for the unusual efforts they made to keep their father. It was only because they feared to see innovations brought in among them with the new Superior and to see fervor depart with their holy Founder that they took so many precautions and showed such innocent obstinacy.

Abbé Madot wished to inform the vicar-general about what he had achieved and what the latter needed to do, so he took him aside and gave him an account of his negotiations. This report pleased the vicar-general, who was sorry for having pursued the demotion of De La Salle with so much vindictiveness, thereby introducing trouble into such a peaceful Community. But he was quite surprised to learn that the Brothers were attaching conditions to their obedience. Here the resourceful mind of the mediator once again came to the rescue. He told the Brothers to kneel down before Pirot and to apologize to him. Answering the question that the vicar-general put to him as to whether the four articles of the document that had been signed were conditions, Madot hastened to reply that these concessions were requested as favors.

Most of the Brothers kept silent on hearing this. Actually, they cared little about the terms used, provided their desires were met. They were concerned about the reality of things, not about words. To these men, determined to preserve their own manner of living, it made no difference if they used the most obsequious terms, provided that they remained in possession of their rules and their rightful Superior. The most respectful and humble expressions were, no doubt, the most proper for them to employ in addressing superior authority, but these terms concealed a certain ambiguity which could give rise to new trouble, for a favor can be refused, whereas a condition cannot without nullifying the contract based on it. Therefore, the more alert among the Brothers, perceiving the difference in the terms used and the danger that their demands might be jeopardized thereby, declared bluntly and in a voice loud enough to be heard that the articles in question were indeed conditions attached to their submission and that if these remained unfulfilled, their obedience would be compromised. Pirot's wisdom made him deaf to all this, and he seemed not to hear them.

Madot, delighted over his success, inquired whether His Eminence could give them an audience and whether he would allow the Brothers to go to prostrate themselves at his feet to recognize his authority. When the vicar-general replied that His Eminence was not available, they all went home, congratulating themselves on the victory they had won. The Brothers exulted because they remained in peaceful possession of their rules and their Founder. The mediator rejoiced that he had made peace and had managed to reconcile the respect due to the archbishop's jurisdiction with the right of the Brothers to keep their way of life and their internal arrangements undisturbed.

The following Sunday, Pirot brought Bricot to the novitiate for the second time and addressed those of the Brothers whom he found there, for the majority of those employed in the schools were absent. Then the entire community went to the chapel, and the vicar-general intoned the *Te Deum*, which the others continued chanting in the usual way. All this was done to save face and to pay due respect to episcopal authority, but it was also enough to dispel the tempest which had occasioned so much talk.

The new Superior showed his face in the house once more, three months later, and then disappeared for good. His visit was a formality which was deemed necessary, but he performed no act of jurisdiction and never gave anyone an opportunity of challenging his right to a title which he made no use of. Since his role left him much leisure, His Eminence found something else for him to do elsewhere. Because his place with the Brothers remained empty, the persecutor did not fail to have him replaced by another ecclesiastic who was entirely devoted to him and whom he intended to use to stir up more trouble.

## De La Salle is persuaded to moderate the penitential practices

De La Salle, feeling that he had everything to fear from a former friend who had turned against him and from a simulated peace, took all possible precautions in order not to give him any pretext for interfering and to shelter his own management against his criticism. He put an end to all the penances the use of which his two indiscreet disciples had exaggerated. Although realizing the harm this would do to the piety of the Brothers, he preferred to see their fervor diminish rather than have it disappear entirely as a result of the attacks which were being prepared against him. He was convinced of the truth of the maxim that the best is sometimes the enemy of the good. In other words, in matters pertaining to virtue, we must be satisfied with securing from others what they can give. By insisting imprudently on the most nearly perfect, we may fail to achieve the good. Therefore, the Founder yielded to the advice of wise friends who counseled him to do away with the public use of the discipline, even to suppress it in private for some time, and in general to moderate all the other types of mortification which gave rise to wild tales and provided his enemies with a pretext to accuse him of thoughtlessness.

These friends based their advice on the characters of those who, on leaving his house, were usually disgruntled and tried to justify their departure or their desertion by spreading malicious reports and odious horror stories. They told him that such individuals had entered

the Community led by a spirit other than the Spirit of God and hence could not remain, that they were unfaithful to their vocation, or that they lacked good judgment, were ruled by passion and other defects, and saw everything as painted by their dominant inclinations. Wisdom requires, the friends said, that you deprive all these evil-intentioned eyes and these poisoned and venomous tongues of all matters which they can twist into slander.

Ecclesiastical authorities seconded these counsels and asked the servant of God to lighten a yoke which really appeared too heavy. The vocation of your disciples, they told him, is the sanctification of youth; the Institute is extremely useful to the faithful. The Brothers must not seek in unrestrained penance the shortest path to a better life. Their earthly pilgrimage may be lengthened, but it will thereby become more salutary. As they walk in it, they must bring along with them the children entrusted to their care. They must not present themselves at the gates of heaven alone but accompanied by a large number of children, if they hope to be welcomed there. This numerous escort which must lead them as if in triumph to the home of glory must be made up of the young people whom they have instructed and helped to sanctify themselves.

The penance the Brothers practice must, therefore, leave them both the time and the means of carrying out their task; it should be tailored to fit their vocation so as not to shorten their lives and diminish their reward. While regarding themselves as victims destined for sacrifice some day, they must maintain themselves in good condition in the meantime so that they may go to the altar of sacrifice as presentable offerings. Anyhow, since their work is part of their penance, they must not do anything which would make them incapable of fulfilling their duties. So, they must try to reconcile their health with their penances; let the Brothers make a long life a laborious one and put the finishing touches on it by their fervor. Temper their austerities so that these may serve to mortify their bodies, not destroy them. Penance is like salt: too much eats away at the meat and consumes it, while a reasonable amount preserves and seasons it.

Such were some of the remarks made to De La Salle, who, without undertaking a critique of all these arguments, humbly gave in to the advice of wiser heads and obediently listened to the remonstrances of his superiors. He collected all the disciplines and limited the practice of all the other types of mortification in use in the Community. In this connection, he issued regulations for those placed in charge of others and forbade them to overstep the limits these wise advisers had suggested and which superiors had enjoined.

The Brothers, who were greatly devoted to their penitential practices, were not a little put out over these new regulations; no more painful mortification could have been asked of them than taking away from them the instruments of penance they used. They needed all their virtue to submit to an order which threatened their fervor. They would have found it difficult to show to anyone other than De La Salle such blind obedience on this point, for they feared lest the spirit might suffer from the mitigation granted to the flesh.

But it was their father who issued this order; the confidence they felt in him and the conviction they had concerning his virtue kept them submissive and did not permit them to imagine that they could go wrong by following his guidance. Besides, they realized that this great lover of penance must have had higher reasons for giving them commands so contrary to his own bent and to what he himself practiced. They could readily understand that he was not acting on his own initiative but under external influences and that he was the first to practice the obedience he was requiring of them. Indeed, when one of the Brothers asked him why he now forbade them to indulge in so many kinds of penance so well calculated to arouse and maintain their fervor, his only reply was: *God has made me understand that now we should not continue them.*

God, no doubt, arranged this so that the customs established at this period could remain in force as time went on and so that the Brothers might develop a lifestyle more in harmony with human weakness and with what their state in life demanded. For it must be acknowledged that among them the rigor of austerity reached such heights that the health of more than one would have given way in time. Penance, while making martyrs in the new Institute, would have shortened the lives of many who pursued it with such ardor. Their manner of living was even poorer than that found in a Trappist monastery; it was neither less crucifying nor less frightful to nature. So it was indeed an admirable thing to see, not in some desert place but at the very gates of the greatest city in France, a revival of the penitential life of the hermits in the Thebaid. It is no less astonishing that many Brothers, some of whom are still living, did not fall victim to this life of penance. With their leading a life as austere as that of Trappist monks, it is a wonder that there were not many more of them who died.

It was certainly necessary to mitigate a degree of austerity which human beings could not endure for long without succumbing and which, while increasing the number of great penitents, might have diminished that of holy schoolmasters, so badly needed by the Christian

community. At the same time, it must be admitted that this great spirit of penance had lit a huge bonfire of piety and devotion in this poor house and that when the one was restricted, the other, too, suffered a diminution. Nothing is truer than what the incomparable Saint Teresa says: *Where there is less nature, there is more grace.* The more we do for God, the more we receive from God. Great penances, when authorized by obedience, are followed by heaven's most abundant favors. Men of great courage take heart in this path and race onward toward perfection with the help of austerities which, like favorable winds, sweep them onward and help them progress. The flesh itself, made spiritual through maceration and privations, becomes light in a way and lets the soul soar freely and rise up to unite itself with God without being dragged back to earth by its own weight.

It was, then, no slight cause of sorrow to one of the great penitents of our century to see himself obliged to restrain his disciples' ardor for penance and to put out, at least to some extent, this fire which he himself had enkindled even more by his example than by his words. The Founder learned from experience, with a deep measure of sadness, that it is practically impossible to relax our practice of mortification without seeing the spirit of mortification suffer, too. It seldom happens that fervor of the spirit survives indulgence of the flesh, because grace, which is measured by the violence that a soul does to itself, grows less when we relax this severity in one way or another.

Nevertheless, on this occasion, De La Salle, who abandoned himself in all things to the guidance of Divine Providence and who did not wish to be wise in his own eyes, made the sacrifice of his own inclinations, his own views, and his own experience and sought in blind obedience a security which cannot be found even in the most austere penance when it is neither prescribed nor controlled by obedience. This sacrifice of his did not calm the tempest, as it should have, once the penitential practices which his enemy had used as an excuse to stir up all the trouble had now been done away with. Although he realized that his intrigue had failed, he did not grow discouraged. Although he no longer attacked the servant of God directly, he did so in an oblique manner, as we shall see in the following chapter.

# Chapter XXI

*Dissatisfaction and criticism that the enemy of De La Salle tried to sow in the Community by means of his agent.*

The persecution seemed to have died away, but it continued just the same. Its author, seeing the failure of his first attack, undertook another which succeeded much better and which caused new alarm for De La Salle by exposing his Institute to new perils. We mentioned previously that the clever enemy of the servant of God had managed to put in Monsieur Bricot's place another ecclesiastic entirely devoted to himself who, without carrying out any of the functions of a Superior in the Community, went about sowing the seeds of discord within its ranks.

This priest, full of the same spirit which animated the one who sent him, came to the novitiate house from time to time to examine what was going on, to sound out the Brothers and their dispositions, and to prepare the way for a change of government. The intriguer's plan was to use clever wiles in order to get rid of the man whom he had not been able to have removed by superior authority. In order to drive him away, he sought to make use of the very Brothers who had shown themselves so determined to keep him in his position. To attain this end, it was necessary to find a way to hoodwink the Brothers, to inspire them with disaffection for their state, to destroy the union between them and their Superior, and to cause indifference to take the place of attachment in their souls, dissimulation to replace confidence, and silence to succeed openness of heart.

The man who set out to accomplish this did not give up the hope of leading the Brothers who might listen to him to the point where he wished to bring them. He thought that by harping on the poverty of their house, the poor quality of their food, the sorry clothes they wore, and the supposed harshness with which they were governed, he could succeed in making them feel disgruntled. Those who listened to him heard him bewailing their sad lot and growing eloquent over their miserable life.

What?—as their charitable visitor exclaimed in smooth words; will you always be as you are now? Will you always be so poor, dressed in rags, dirty, half-naked, or with patched and repatched habits? Does De La Salle not have the wherewithal to supply your needs, not even the most urgent ones? Why does he accept so many candidates and fill the house with more men than he can feed? After all, the salaries

of the Brothers in the schools are paid to him punctually; would not these sums suffice for the Brothers who teach there? Is it not right that these men should live on what their labor produced? Is it fair that they should be robbed of what they earn?

Such suggestions were followed by an account of the money paid to the Brothers in the schools. After this meticulous inquiry, the Jeremiah who was deploring the wretched circumstances in which the Brothers lived would add in a plaintive tone: Where does all this money go? Why is it not spent to provide for the needs of those who earn it? Why should they lack everything when by right they should want for nothing? What is your Superior thinking of? Where is his charity, his humanity? He refuses the necessities of life to the workers he employs. What a house this is! Its inmates are more wretchedly fed than those of the poorhouse! Would the inhabitants of La Salpêtrière be willing to change places with you? Does Bicêtre[33] treat its dwellers any worse than you are treated? Those who are shut up there against their will would not be willing to leave to come to stay with you.

With whom can I compare you, if not with prisoners who, after losing their liberty, are weighed down by a hard and galling yoke and who, after having spent the whole day in toil, moisten the black bread given to them with nothing but their tears and have only a little straw to rest on during the night? In this portrait, do you not recognize yourselves? Will you always be seen in a habit as ridiculous as it is outlandish, which makes you the butt of public scorn and invites the people's ridicule? If they insist on hiding you under such huge hats and on wrapping you up in a sack of black cloth, at least they should provide you with new clothes when you need them.

He stressed the fact that they drank only water, and his pity was followed by promises: that wine would not be wanting if they had sense enough to accept a Superior who would give them the example of drinking it! One of the Brothers, as tired of all this sermonizing as he was shocked at the promise, answered him one day: *But water is good for you; it keeps your complexion fresh.* If you see us looking so healthy, in spite of our fasting and penances, we owe it to the drink that comes from the river. After hearing this, the cleric stopped criticizing the servant of God in such gross terms. He tailored his remarks better to the circumstances of the moment and adapted them to the dispositions of those with whom he spoke. In a word, he made use of every means to win a favorable hearing, and in the grim portrait he painted of the Brothers' mortified life, he sought a way to incite them

33. A mental hospital.

against a man who preached nothing but penance and whose life was a model of it.

Sometimes, by painting a picture of a kind of earthly paradise, he tried to make them desire a different kind of government under a less-demanding leader; at other times, he tried to win certain ones over by suggesting that they take things a bit easier; others he approached by making them imagine that the difficulties of their state were worse than they really were. He flattered these by inspiring them with rosy hopes; he intimidated others by making them fear a future which would contain nothing but sacrifices for them. To all, he promised an easier and happier life.

At other times, raking over old coals, he tried to get them to admit that they had been wrong in refusing the new Superior whom God himself had sent them through his representative, the archbishop. He reproached them with having set up their own Superior, one whom they had chosen but who was not necessarily the one God wanted; hence he would not have the grace to guide them. Sometimes he tried to make them regret their so-called blind obstinacy in making a Superior for themselves by their own authority, and he sought to bring them to desire and request another. What advantages, he said, would you not have found in perfect submission to the new Superior whom heaven destined for you? You would have enjoyed greater liberty; all your needs would have been provided for. Now that you have preferred to remain in this blind alley, where can you find the resources needed to relieve your poverty? All your Founder's friends are abandoning him. De La Chétardie himself, your great benefactor, is growing disillusioned with him. If you would only cast away the yoke which overburdens you, what enjoyment you would find in a new form of government! You have become accustomed to bending your necks and to bearing the burden without complaining, but we weep for you. We feel so sorry for you, since you do not pity yourselves, and we are offering you a friendly hand to rid you of your burdens if you will only consent to let your chains be broken.

Is it not strange that many do not wish to profit by the offer made to you and prefer to follow De La Salle in chains rather than to be freed from this captivity? Do they love him? But how can they love so austere a Superior and be so attached to a man who gives no quarter to nature? No doubt, it is because they fear him; that is why they remain faithful to him. But what can De La Salle do for them if they remain attached to him? He will continue to make them miserable. What have they to fear from him if they refuse to live under his bondage? What can he do to them? He can't do anything, either for

good or for evil. His influence is nil. Thus, those who do not dare to break their own bonds are condemning themselves to drag out the rest of their days in a painful and hopeless manner.

Not all this man's words were uttered as bluntly as we have set them down here, but we wished to give the reader an idea of what he was trying to get across. His purpose was to make the conduct of De La Salle seem odious in the eyes of the Brothers. We would only weary our readers if we were to add all the details of the dangerous conversations held by this visiting ecclesiastic. He did not preach from the housetops but went about whispering, in one ear and then in another, his beautiful doctrine for the Brothers to meditate on. One would not have thought that he acted with a predetermined plan in mind; he seemed, rather, to speak at random and dropped remarks about this or that. He chose the right moments, watched for favorable occasions, and always measured the mood of his hearers.

Sometimes it was just one word, sometimes another; to this one, he addressed a wink and a sneer; to that one, a meaningful hint. Everything seemed to issue from his mouth at random, yet everything he said was premeditated. In a word, this priest who worked so painstakingly for the persecutor came to the house in the spirit of Absalom when he went to David's palace intending to spread discontent with his father's government, to steal away the hearts of the children of Israel, to cause them to defect, and to arm them against their king. The emissary's intrigues, however, did not meet with the same success as those of this traitorous son of the holiest king of Israel. The priest either spoke without being listened to or was heard without being believed; if he was believed by a few, this did not turn them against De La Salle personally.

If his ill-intentioned conduct produced any results at all, it was only indirectly that these managed to wound the servant of God. The Brothers usually kept out of the way of this dangerous hypocrite. They avoided meeting him. In vain did he keep an eye open for what was going on and wait for the Brothers as they passed by. Those whom he stopped hastened to cut the conversation short and managed to get away from him. As for De La Salle, he always went out to greet him, paid him due honor, and spoke to him most respectfully.

We must admit, nevertheless, that this doctrine of relaxation, preached so artfully and in secret at a time when the severity of the penitential practices in the community had been reduced, did not contribute to increasing the fervor found in the house. It even became a trap for the tepid; some of them fell into it and found their spiritual doom in it. This was another cause of sorrow for a man who loved

his disciples as a father loves his children and who wept over their loss as a tender mother laments over an only son.

All that the servant of God wanted was to sanctify those whom God had given him. His Community, although his life's work, held no interest for him, except insofar as he knew that God was generously served in it and that the Spirit of Jesus Christ reigned there. To see its fervor growing cool was the bitterest martyrdom his soul could have endured, and in that situation, he would have willingly accepted the destruction of his Institute. Nay, he would have been the first to abandon it, if those who belonged to it had fallen from their early virtue. What torment his heart suffered when he saw some of them belying their early fervor and turning back on that high road where they should always march forward! This was the interior cross which replaced the exterior ones that we have been speaking about. The defection of several of the principal disciples of the holy priest was the bitter fruit produced by the frequent visits of this ecclesiastic who had been sent to spy on everything that was going on in the Grande Maison and to be on the watch to seize every occasion of stirring up discontent and dissatisfaction with the Superior.

## The bad effect of these suggestions on two of the Brothers

The first one who listened to these perfidious suggestions and resolved to abandon his vocation was a Brother whom De La Salle considered as his right-hand man. Once he had grown sour, he got another Brother to share his discontent, and once he had made an accomplice of him, the two of them set out for a place where the parish priest was expecting some Brothers. This was a new foundation which had been arranged with the servant of God. This traitorous disciple knew about this and made use of his knowledge to leave the house, thinking he could thus secure for himself a good position and enough to live on comfortably for the rest of his life. Commissioned by no one but himself and without the Founder's knowledge, he went with his companion to take over—or rather to steal—this school. He was still wearing his Brothers' habit and presented himself as having come through obedience. This deceived the parish priest, but his triumph was short-lived.

After he and his companion had been welcomed with all sorts of tokens of esteem and kindness as children of De La Salle, they were driven out ignominiously as soon as their hypocrisy and desertion became known to the ecclesiastical authorities. The parish priest was ordered by the vicar-general to expel from his parish these impudent

interlopers who had intruded themselves into this position. They had not been sent either by the authorities or by their holy Founder. The wretched fugitives immediately came back to the house which they had dishonored and scandalized by their surreptitious departure, but the community closed its doors to them and begged their common father not to let himself be moved by the pleas of these two sons of Belial, since it was necessary to punish their crime and to make an example of them.

## The Director of Novices defects to the Trappists

The second who, in his turn, wounded his father's heart was the Director of Novices, the indiscreet and pitiless taskmaster who had made his novices groan under the heavy yoke of his direction. By yielding to the suggestions of a spirit of penance mostly inspired by a naturally harsh and unfeeling temperament, he had drawn down, not on his own head but on that of the servant of God, the ruthless persecution which we have described above and which led to all the rest that followed. This fanatical devotee of penance had made several of the young men entrusted to his care grow discouraged with their vocation and with perfection itself, thanks to his abuse of the authority entrusted to him. Finally, he too grew dissatisfied with his vocation. A pity he had not done so some years earlier; he would have spared his holy Founder some heavy crosses and would have prevented the ravages in his Institute which we shall relate farther on.

At any rate, bored with his assignments, this Brother asked to be relieved of them and to be sent to a school where he fancied he would do better. This De La Salle refused to consent to, for reasons we do not know. The Brother allowed himself to be led astray by a will-o'-the-wisp; he wanted to leave one house where strict penance was practiced to go to another like it, but there he found the door shut. He went to La Trappe, wishing to enter the monastery. The way he chose to carry out this decision showed that it had not been inspired by our heavenly Father. This man, impelled by passion rather than by the Holy Spirit, instead of informing his Superior of his project, had kept it entirely secret and confided it only to one other Brother whom he chose as his companion in his flight.

How and when did they run away? The most natural way would have been to leave by the door. If they wished to keep their departure secret, they could have chosen the time when the doors were opened in the morning or when they were shut at night. *Whoever does not enter or leave by the door*, says Jesus Christ, *is a thief* or at

least imitates the wiliness of the thief. Our Lord says again, *Whoever does evil hates the light.* He seeks to carry out his evil actions under cover of darkness. This poor Brother, who chose to depart at night by climbing over the wall, might have realized, if he had reflected for a moment, that he was doing a deed of darkness and was being led astray by a lying spirit.

The two deserters reached the Trappists still wearing the habit of their Community, but they found the doors shut against them. The abbot, who had succeeded Monsieur de Rancé and knew the servant of God very well, refused to admit them until he found out how and why they had left their own Community. He was even kind enough to write to De La Salle to find out from him whether these two Brothers had come to La Trappe with his consent. The holy priest received this letter at a time when the departure of these two Brothers had placed him in a very awkward situation, because he did not have any others who could replace them at the moment. Hope of getting them back assuaged his sorrow. After thanking the abbot for the information which had allayed his anxiety when he learned that the two Brothers had reached La Trappe safely, he begged him to send them back to him and not to admit any others in the future without his assent. This was done.

This Director of Novices, whose indiscreet and harsh behavior had caused so much trouble, died three years later, at Chartres, of a strange and violent malady. He would not open his mouth except to utter horrible cries, which he continued almost to the point of death. The other Brother left the Society definitely not long afterward. These are two terrible examples of God's vengeance on those who govern themselves solely by their own light or are unfaithful to their vocation. This melancholy story shows the difference between true and false virtue. It illustrates the truth that only when virtue is founded on perfect abnegation of our own spirit, natural inclinations, and the like is it truly pure.

## Desertion of the two Brothers in charge of the Sunday School

After these two, the ones who added to the Founder's trials were the two Brothers employed in the Sunday School, which we mentioned above. De La Salle had spared neither pains nor expense to have them learn drawing, geometry, and mathematics. Endowed with aptitudes for these studies, they had become excellent teachers, thanks to their efforts and to their natural ability, and they taught with marked success. Some of their students made them believe that they could

earn a good deal of money if they were willing to use for their own benefit the time and effort they spent in teaching gratuitously.

They listened to these siren words suggested to them by the Old Serpent. Once this temptation took root in their hearts, it caused great ravages in them and enkindled a blaze which consumed what little virtue they still possessed, already seriously undermined by secret vanity and self-complacency. Disenchanted with a state of life which they had embraced in answer to God's call and which had seemed a happy one to them, as long as they did not know any more than the other Brothers, and led astray by the hope of improving their fortune, they themselves came and informed De La Salle that they had decided to leave. They asked him to open for them the doors of a house which offered them only intangible benefits and recompenses in the next life as the reward for their learned teaching.

A strong chain restrained them, of course, from leaving the house, a chain they themselves had forged when they made perpetual vows of stability and obedience. This bond, however, even though indissoluble for a soul which has not lost all fear of God, is not strong enough to hold back souls which have grown tepid and lost their first fervor. In vain did the servant of God, surprised, distressed, and scandalized at the resolve taken by the two Brothers, try by remonstrances and gentle reproaches to hold them back by appealing to the sense of duty in their consciences, which, alas, had become deaf and blind. De La Salle reminded them of the money he had spent to enable them to acquire this knowledge which they were using to jeopardize their souls. He sought to make them realize what a crime they were about to commit and the punishment they must expect for it from divine justice. He spoke to prodigal children who had made up their minds and who could not abide in their father's house any longer.

With hardened hearts, they heard the servant of God describe for them the unpleasant situation they were going to create for him by their desertion. You know, he told them, how much store De La Chétardie sets on the Sunday School and on the subjects taught in it. If you go, the school will have to close. How will I ever explain this to the parish priest of Saint Sulpice, so deeply interested in this institution which he devised and set up and which he has seen producing such good results? What are you going to do by forcing the Sunday School to close, except compromise all the others and completely alienate from me the man who is our support and the greatest protector and benefactor of the Institute? All these evil consequences which will follow your departure affect not only you but also the body of which you are members. Is all this not capable of making

you change your minds? If you are fully determined and have lost all concern for the interests of your soul and the souls of your neighbors, at least put off the execution of this sudden decision, and give me time to have two other Brothers prepared to take your places. Is it possible that you want to see the fires of persecution in this house, which are not entirely quenched, flare up again, even after you withstood them with me? Can you have any doubt that your desertion will arouse the indignation of the parish priest against me and will completely indispose this man whom the Institute needs most and that you will be helping to put an end to the great zeal he has hitherto shown for its development?

But the good Superior spoke in vain to these men who had made themselves deaf to the voice of the Holy Spirit. Their departure was something already decided upon; avarice and ambition had joined forces in bringing them to this decision. So they carried it out, to the great distress of the servant of God and in spite of his unwavering opposition. Overcome by his impatience, the Brother most eager to leave ran away. De La Salle replaced him as well as he could. The other, after delaying his departure for a few months with great reluctance, finally imitated his companion's unfortunate example. This scandal put the finishing touches on the sorrow of the man of God and threw him into extreme difficulties.

It is not surprising that God did not delay in avenging the Founder, for he made the first of these cowardly deserters suffer the penalty for his crime. Disappointed at seeing all his fine projects go up in smoke and at finding only penury where he had hoped to secure a fortune, he died without the sacraments in the parish of Saint Roch at Paris in 1709. Thanks to his sin, his death was caused by the extreme poverty in which he lived and which had overtaken him instead of the lucrative situation he had expected to obtain.

## Brothers resist being assigned to study for the Sunday School

De La Salle never grew discouraged; a continual succession of crosses and disappointments had taught him patience. He chose the one among his disciples whom he considered the best fitted to learn the subjects which De La Chétardie wanted taught and which added so much to the reputation of the Sunday School. De La Salle, however, was much taken by surprise by the opposition he found: the Brother was extremely reluctant to undertake these studies. This hesitation had its source in his virtue. It was not lack of interest in his vocation, pure whim, self-will, or laziness which made him wary of undertaking

these brilliant studies but rather love for his vocation and a desire to persevere in it. The example of the two deserters impressed him strongly, and he was afraid that he, too, might meet with disaster in a role which had given rise to their desertion.

Full of prudent mistrust of self and resolved to avoid their unfortunate fate, he wished to remain in the lowly state proper to his profession, and thus he shut his heart against vanity, ambition, and avarice. For these reasons, he objected to preparing himself for a task the dangers of which frightened him and which he looked upon with apprehension as an occasion of infidelity, as it indeed had proved for the other two. He even took the liberty of telling his Superior that the defection of these two Brothers, whose hearts had been puffed up with their learning, was a sign God was giving to the others to limit themselves to the simple functions of teachers in the Gratuitous Schools: reading, writing, arithmetic, catechism, and instructions on Christian living. In addition, this Brother, so dismayed over the misfortune of the two deserters, communicated his apprehensions to all the others, and by leading them to share his views, he made them reluctant to undertake further studies which would almost inevitably constitute for them a snare where the most robust virtue would meet with shipwreck. All of them, sharing his ideas on the subject, came to De La Salle, begging him to leave them as they were and not to oblige them to risk their salvation in the pursuit of learning which was really foreign to their profession.

Seriously embarrassed by this unanimous protest of his disciples against an institution which certainly was useful, De La Salle simply replied, without going into the question of the reasons which might justify their reluctance, that they should, out of concern for higher motives, make the sacrifice of this hesitancy. He told them that obedience, self-mistrust, and a pure intention would provide safeguards against the reef where their lack of virtue had caused the first two geometry teachers to run aground. He insisted that they had to keep open the Sunday School, where so much good was obviously being done, and that it would surely have to be closed if the subjects in question were no longer offered. He explained that he was really not free in the matter, because, as they well knew, the parish priest of Saint Sulpice, on whom they all depended and whose help was essential for them, was vitally interested in the Sunday School. It was much to be feared that he might punish their opposition on this point by becoming indifferent to them and abandoning them entirely. Of the two dangers, it was necessary to choose the lesser one, that is, not to annoy their benefactor and protector.

These arguments were serious ones and should have brought the Brothers to overcome their aversion, however well founded, for pursuing the study of these sciences which had already proved fatal to two of their companions and which remained dangerous for all of them. If they had allowed themselves to be persuaded, they would have spared their Superior a host of new troubles, because it was always he who was considered to be at fault and who had to bear the punishment for the faults of his disciples. These Brothers, biased by principles rooted in piety and out of concern for their salvation, refused to give up their resolution. To show that this was not due to a spirit of disobedience but to a salutary fear of succumbing where others had already met with disaster, they drew up a memorandum which was presented to De La Salle by its author. In it they objected so strenuously to the study of the subjects in question that they felt sure, if he had the goodness to read it, that De La Salle would come around to their point of view. The servant of God did read it but did not answer a word. Perhaps, in fact, he felt that there was nothing to reply, or perhaps he knew that any reply would have been useless.

If we may judge of what he himself thought by what he later did, the Founder seems to have been convinced by the cogency of the arguments offered by his disciples and to have espoused their point of view. He went to De La Chétardie to see if he could win his approval and consent to discontinue these subjects in the school. Unfortunately, the pastor of Saint Sulpice was already deeply prejudiced against the servant of God. He was filled with these preconceived notions—a failing which even the greatest men are not always successful in avoiding in this world—and although he was still quite interested in the Gratuitous Schools, he was very cold toward the holy Founder.

De La Salle was well aware of this; he still entertained great respect for De La Chétardie's outstanding merits and deep gratitude for all his past favors. He was not a little distressed over having lost such a good friend and powerful protector, but what consoled him was that the pastor did not let the indifference he felt toward his own person extend to his work. For this reason, from a sense of duty as much as from concern for his own interests, De La Salle took all possible precautions and tried to preserve in the virtuous pastor a vestige of his zeal for the Institute and his kindness toward the Brothers. This was the main reason why he had wanted some Brothers to study the subjects needed to continue the Sunday School. But all his efforts and conciliatory gestures remained without effect. De La Chétardie blamed him for the Brothers' refusal; convinced that the Founder himself had drawn up the memorandum brought to him, he received him rudely.

## De La Salle is blamed for the collapse of the Sunday School

As one prejudice leads to another, De La Chétardie, who of course was aware of the departure of the other two Brothers, blamed this also on De La Salle and reproached him with it in an outrageous manner. The holy priest listened to him with a patience, mildness, and calm which, while demonstrating his innocence of the charges, also revealed the joy his soul experienced in the midst of ignominy. Days of humiliation were for him feast days, and after having received such greetings and insults from one of the greatest men then living in Paris, he came back home with jubilation in his heart. A few days later, the holy Founder, who still felt deep regret on seeing the parish priest of Saint Sulpice so bitterly antagonistic toward him and thought himself obliged to do all he could to undeceive him, brought him the memorandum that the Brother had written. He wished to give De La Chétardie a proof that it was not he but his disciples who felt an invincible distaste for undertaking the study of these subjects which they feared might prove their undoing.

God's designs on his servants are indeed incomprehensible; he often permits that what constitutes their justification should serve for their condemnation. In this straightforward conduct of the Founder, the pastor saw nothing but duplicity and convinced himself that the one presenting the memorandum was its true author. When he read it, his suspicion that De La Salle had contributed to its composition only grew stronger, and he reproached him in a highly emotional way, saying that in this document he recognized the gist of his thinking and that if it was not written by him, at least it had been ordered by him.

In vain the humble priest tried to convince the parish priest that he had nothing to do with the text and that it had been drawn up without his knowledge. He was not believed. De La Chétardie forgot himself to the point of calling him a liar. God permitted this to purify further the virtue of his servant and allowed him to be thus grossly insulted by a peevish sally from a man generally known for his moderation, all this to exercise the patience of the innocent man thus accused. This insult, which pierces every upright and candid soul more keenly than any other, did not reach the heart of a man who by now had grown accustomed to scorn and affronts. It even inspired him with a significant rejoinder: *Monsieur*, he answered most respectfully, *it is with this lie on my lips that I am going to say Mass.* In fact, he then went over to the parish church to celebrate the Holy Sacrifice.

The servant of God did not, however, get off quite so easily as this. His destiny seems to have been to bear the consequences of

faults for which he was not responsible and to expiate both the real faults his disciples committed and the imaginary ones which were blamed on him. By reducing their salaries, De La Chétardie punished the Brothers for discontinuing the drawing lessons. This measure, which caused much privation in the poorest community in Paris, was felt by the Superior even more keenly than the insult he himself had received. But neither of these incidents caused him to suffer as much as did the failure of the Sunday School. The closing down of this excellent enterprise, which occurred when the subjects which had attracted most of the students were discontinued, justified the firmness with which De La Salle had opposed the Brothers' resolution. He was doubly pained over the ruin of such a good work and over the justifiable irritation felt by the parish priest.

The Sunday School, however, did not close down all at once. Its final demise came about gradually. The first step followed the desertion of those two excellent teachers, as we have mentioned. The second ensued after the refusal of the Brothers to undertake studies they considered dangerous for themselves. One of the Brothers, however, pitying both the deep perplexity into which this refusal had plunged their Superior and the extreme penury of the house which had resulted from it, offered to study drawing. He mastered the subject in a short time, and the Sunday School was able to reopen. More than 200 students filled the classes as usual. The remarkable thing is that these young men never got bored at the Brothers' school, where they devoted nearly the entire afternoon to exercises of piety and to reading, writing, arithmetic, and other subjects.

Whereas such young men are, as a rule, very prone to licentiousness, the greatest benefit the students derived from this was that they forgot the way to the cabarets and other dangerous spots. Instead, they learned how to sanctify Sundays and feasts by prayer and to acquire both the benefits of heaven and the advantages of earth. Several of them changed their conduct considerably and began living like true Christians, frequenting the sacraments and attending church after having made up for the evil lives they had led by a good general confession.

When the Sunday School reopened, so did the purse of the parish priest; he had shut it only to let hunger impress the minds of the Brothers more forcibly than his words had been able to do. The teaching of drawing was also revived in the ordinary schools, because the pastor wanted it taught to the children there. This respite continued for a while. Later, the Sunday School was transferred to the parish of Saint Antoine, where it finally had to be abandoned, as we shall

soon mention. This third step in the destruction of this project was the final one. Still, to this day, all those who were acquainted with its operation in Paris long to see it re-established and often beg the Brothers to open another Sunday School.

## The desertion of another Brother and his request to return

All the misfortunes we have just related were followed by the disgraceful trickery of the Brother in charge of the center for training country schoolmasters in the parish of Saint Hippolyte, by his departure from the Society, and by the complete collapse of this excellent institution. All this we have related above.

The final blow that grieved the Founder very deeply was the departure of another Brother, who left his school, went to live with a citizen of Paris, and put aside his religious garb. As soon as the good shepherd heard of this, he went after the lost sheep and brought him back to the fold. How did he succeed in doing this? By going down on his knees before him, by using pleas instead of reproaches and supplications instead of threats. This prodigal son did not deserve that his good father should thus go seeking him or take such pains to get him to come back.

Some ten years later, this unworthy member was expelled from the house by orders of the diocesan officials in Rouen. But at the time we are speaking of, his talents made him very necessary, and his separation, after all the others we have mentioned, left an empty place that nobody could fill. This Brother was an excellent penman. Nothing was wanting for him to succeed in his vocation except piety. Perhaps we should say that he lacked everything, since he lacked piety. Without it, the most varied talents are useless in a state which has for its end the sanctification of youth. Piety can make up for the lack of great ability, but great ability can never make up for the absence of piety.

To make matters even worse, as we shall relate at greater length in the next book, the enemy took advantage of this particular moment to stir up the schoolmasters once more against the Brothers, who do not sell their services as those teachers do. Up to this time, the influence of the parish priest of Saint Sulpice had protected the Brothers from the vexations of the schoolmasters and had brought their intrigues to nothing. They did not dare to challenge openly these men whom he loved and whose defense he resolutely undertook. Once this protection was withdrawn, the schoolmasters felt that they could make short work of men who were remarkable only by their poverty

and by the slight esteem they enjoyed in the world. The fact was that De La Chétardie, once a firm friend of the Institute, seemed to have lost all his concern for it and no longer took any interest in its progress. His indifference grew, along with his bias, and this led to irritation and then to abandonment. So the moment was ripe for the rivals of the Brothers, and they made the most of it. They began another attack against the Brothers, who, they said, were practicing charity at their expense. The attack was so furious that they seemed about to triumph, and their victory came close to destroying the Gratuitous Schools entirely.

## Fervor lessens with the relaxation of penitential practices

It must be admitted that most of these difficulties were a consequence of the relaxation in the spirit of penance which had once reigned in the Community and had nourished the fervor of the Brothers. De La Salle had been obliged to mitigate its practice out of deference for the advice of wise friends and out of obedience to the wishes his superiors had expressed, but he foresaw very clearly what would follow. It can be said that on this occasion, obedience demanded of him the greatest sacrifice that his piety could ever have offered to God. It was precisely during this time of mitigation that the visiting priest came around, preaching relaxation and sowing complaints against the austerity of which the Superior showed a continual example. It seemed that God was presenting to the eyes of a city, which can be called the world in miniature, these living examples of the penitential spirit of a former time. He wished to show to the most incredulous and the most cowardly that weak human nature, when fortified by grace, can even in these latest centuries of the Church repeat what it did in the first. We must seek the real cause for the disappearance of Christian austerity in our natural cowardice, not in the progressive weakening of the human body.

It is true that the Grande Maison, where the Brothers lived, was better furnished than the smaller house at Vaugirard had been. At the request of the parish priest of Saint Sulpice, Madame Voisin had provided beds, essential kitchen utensils, and even tin plates for the refectory—really magnificent equipment in a community which had never used anything but earthenware of the commonest and cheapest kind. But otherwise the poverty, austerity, and rigorous mortification practiced in the Vaugirard novitiate had been transported to the Grande Maison and had even been augmented by the number of novices. The habits they wore were so poor, so threadbare, and so

patched that they were finally put aside only when they could no longer be repaired. Fresh water from the well was the only drink found in this penitential house; wine was never brought in, except for use in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

It is true that in 1700 or 1701, fifteen or sixteen demi-muids[34] of wine arrived at the house. This gift allowed each of the Brothers a demi-setier of wine at noon and in the evening. But the Brothers could recognize the new drink they were served only by its color, not by its taste, and this change did not last very long in such a numerous community. When they drank this wine, they could have said that they did not drink it, so little did they consume. There was only enough to redden the water that they mixed with it, according to the Rule[35] and following the example of their Superior.

The meals, like the drink, included only the most ordinary foodstuffs. This coarse fare, which could not arouse the appetite save when it was whetted by hunger, made the common people give the Brothers unflattering nicknames, such as *eaters of ox feet.* At this time, they no longer received the leftovers from the community of Saint Sulpice, which had provided them with real delicacies now and then.

However long and rigorous the winters might be, the Brothers protected themselves from the cold only by waiting for the sun to return or by using the discipline frequently. This maceration of the flesh, which was a daily practice inspired by lively piety and an insatiable desire for suffering, did not replace other austerities; each one was resorted to in turn. There was no kind of humiliation or mortification which had not become common in a house where De La Salle gave the example.

Yet, the Brothers did not complain under this accumulation of sacrifices. Fervor, which made their burdens light, tempered the hardship by the unction of grace. The delights of the spirit compensated for the immolation of the flesh, and their hearts, which sought this greater satisfaction, were quite willing to purchase the delights afforded by grace at the cost of nature's satisfaction. The most mortified among the Brothers were the happiest, and by merely looking at them, we could not have told by the way they appeared that they were making use of instruments of penance. In this house, no one murmured about the strict life they led or the extreme poverty which reigned. If the imprudence of the two Brothers already mentioned had not drawn from two or three novices the complaints they made, more

34. About 500 gallons.

35. This provision came only in the Rule of 1725.

against the harsh way they had been treated than against the penances themselves, these mortifications would still be carried on there in all their rigor, and the world would know nothing about it.

Because a great spirit of penance never says *enough*, many of the disciples of this latter-day John the Baptist wished to measure up to him and even rival him on this point, if such had been allowed. As insipid as their food was, they felt that they were too well treated, and they deprived themselves of most of what was served at table. On beholding their master, the disciples felt that they were doing nothing. His example, which they could not equal, did not make them despair but rather spurred them on to undertake, without ceasing, new efforts at overcoming themselves and reaching that perfect death to nature which they admired so much in the Founder. Whether he had grown accustomed to mortification and no longer felt its sting or whether the victory he had won over his natural squeamishness had merited for him the grace of finding tasty the viands which formerly inspired him with disgust, they could see him eating with apparent relish everything that was most unappetizing and poorly prepared.

Such was the life led in the Grande Maison when the new Superior was brought in; it was through fear of seeing this strict lifestyle relaxed by the new master, under the pretext of mitigating its excessive rigor, that the Brothers remained so attached to their old Superior. If these penitents had been as revolted by such a crucified life as the persecutor imagined, they would have been delighted to exchange it for an easier one and would have willingly gone over to a government more considerate of human frailty. But the fact was that they themselves were giving proof of their virtue by trying to defend that of their holy Founder. This refusal to accept a more accommodating Superior for fear of condescending under him to the inclinations of nature, this unwillingness to mitigate an extraordinarily poor and penitential life by accepting a more benign type of government, is something quite unusual. If it was a fault, we cannot find many examples like it, save in the lives of the saints. When a new Superior was offered to this Community, the promise was made that abundance and all the commodities of life would enter along with him. The victims of the most rigid penance and of the direst poverty were told that they would be delivered from this unbearable yoke and that they would recover some of nature's rights. It was this promise which disturbed them. Once again, if the motive was defective, we must at least admit that it is a very rare and spiritually inspired one.

If De La Salle had so attracted the Brothers, if he had, so to speak, bound their souls to his, as Holy Scripture expresses it in

speaking of the strong attachment between David and Jonathan, we may ask how he had accomplished this: merely by the attraction exercised by his virtue, by the impression made by his example. The ties that bound them to him were, on the one hand, entirely supernatural, since the desire for perfection and the fear of not measuring up to it constituted the links in the chain. On the other hand, considering how many things De La Salle had done which deserved all the esteem and affection of his disciples, was it not right for them to remain inviolably attached to him? They did indeed remain faithful and submissive to him, and they gave him the most obvious proof of their confidence and submission when they consented to cut down, as he asked them to, on the great number of practices of humiliation and penance which had taken root in the Institute.

To maintain these very practices, they had rejected the interloper from whom they feared mitigation, but they renounced them when their father proposed it to them and asked them to conform. No doubt they knew that in this the holy priest was acting less from his own convictions than out of deference to the persons whom he had consulted or who had a right to command him. In addition, they realized that by doing away with a good many external penances, De La Salle was trying to promote interior mortification and that by sacrificing his own judgment and his supernatural inclinations, he was offering his homage to perfect obedience and to perfect humility.

In fact, his regret at losing these great means of sanctification was obvious on his countenance when he took away from his disciples their instruments of penance. He showed his sorrow by his signs, and to the protests of the Brothers, he replied that *God would no longer be pleased with sacrifices which were not approved by the superiors.* Penance had become so deeply rooted in the hearts of the holy Founder's disciples that the adversary's agent—who so often came prowling around their house to make them leave it and who thought that by his promises of an easier and more comfortable life he could get them disgusted with the yoke they were carrying and with the one who had laid it on them—was wasting his time and efforts. As a result of the services he rendered to the one who had sent him, all he gained was the confusion and the displeasure of seeing De La Salle and the Brothers go to live elsewhere.

Never was there a more sincere and generous attachment than that which bound these good children to their father. Rather than separate from him, they preferred to undergo all sorts of persecutions, share his poverty and his trials, withstand attacks on all sides, overcome the difficulties and obstacles which were multiplied daily, and fi-

nally, turn their backs on the rosy prospects dangled before their eyes if they had been willing to break with him. Yet, after all, their fidelity to him was not unreasonable. Gratitude and justice made it a duty for them. They owed this to the one who was their father in Jesus Christ.

Grace, which loosens even the bonds of nature, had united them with him, and in addition, they had imposed on themselves an obligation of not submitting to a stranger as their Superior when they had vowed not to accept any Superior who was not a member of their Society. This vow, made and signed by them in 1694, which we mentioned previously, certainly justifies their constant refusal to recognize Bricot as their Superior. Their conscience was bound by this vow; they would have felt they were violating it if they had consented to this proposal. Divine Providence had provided for the safeguarding of their Institute by inspiring them to make this vow at a time when neither they nor De La Salle could foresee what was going to happen.

## End of Book Two

The index to the names of persons and places
is located at the end of Book Three.

The index to the names of persons and places
is located at the end of Book Three.

# The Life of John Baptist de La Salle, Founder of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools

A Biography in Three Books

Book Three

Frontispiece from the 1733 edition of Blain's *Life*, an engraving by Jean-Baptiste Scotin of a painting by Pierre Léger which is now lost. (Émile Rousset, *J. B. de La Salle; Iconographie*, Boulogne: Limet, 1979, plate 9.)

# The Life of John Baptist de La Salle, Founder of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools

## A Biography in Three Books

Book Three

Jean-Baptiste Blain
Translated by Richard Arnandez, FSC
Edited by Luke Salm, FSC

Lasallian Publications
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## Lasallian Publications

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The editor is pleased
to dedicate this revised translation
to Augustine Loes, FSC,
in gratitude for
a life-long association,
crowned in the Buttimer Institute
and Lasallian Publications
by a collaborative search
for the mind and heart of
John Baptist de La Salle

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Sponsored by Christian Brothers Conference (the Regional Conference of Christian Brothers of the United States of America and Toronto), Lasallian Publications will include nineteen volumes on the life, writings, and work of John Baptist de La Salle (1651–1719), Founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, and on the early history of the Brothers. These volumes will be presented in two series.

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# Book Three

# LA VIE
## DE MONSIEUR
# JEAN-BAPTISTE
# DE LA SALLE,
## INSTITUTEUR
## DES FRERES DES ECOLES
## CHRE'TIENNES.

## LIVRE TROISIE'ME,

*Où Monſieur* DE LA SALLE *eſt repreſenté comme le grand Zelateur de l'Inſtruction & de l'Education Chrétienne de la jeuneſſe pauvre & abandonnée.*

*Diverſes tribulations qui le ſuivent de tous côtez, & qui donnent lieu à divers établiſſemens.*

JESUS-CHRIST l'a dit : *Si le grain de froment ne meurt en terre, il ne produit point de fruit.* Ce n'eſt que par ſa mort qu'il renaît & qu'il ſe reproduit au centuple. La vérité de cet oracle trouve ſa preuve dans celui-là même qui l'a prononcé; car c'eſt ſa mort qui a rendu la vie au genre humain; c'eſt ſa Croix qui eſt la clef du Royaume des Cieux. Auſſi tôt qu'il y a été attaché, il a attiré toutes choſes à lui, & il a fait de l'inſtrument de ſon ſuplice, le trophée de ſes victoires. Les membres ſuivent le ſort du Chef. Plus ils ſont mortifiez, plus l'eſprit les vivifie : c'eſt la mort de la nature qui leur procure la vie de la grace. C'eſt la perſécution qui en épurant leur vertu, la fait fructifier, croître, & multiplier. En effet, c'eſt la perſécution qui en diſperſant les Apôtres, a montré à l'Univers ſes Conquerans; & qui en les faiſant fuir de Ville en Ville a porté la Foi, l'Evangile, & le nom de Jeſus-Chriſt ſur leurs pas dans toutes les parties du monde. Or ce que l'Egliſe a vû dans ſa naiſſance, chaque ſiécle le reproduit. Les membres particuliers de ce grand Corps miſtique, n'ont point d'autres principes de leur origine & de leurs progrès ſpirituel. Ils croiſſent & ils ſe fortifient comme lui au milieu des croix. Les plantes choi-



Title page of Book Three from the original 1733 edition of Blain's *Life*. Cahiers lasalliens 8 (Rome: Maison Saint Jean-Baptiste de La Salle, 1961), p. 1.

# Book Three

*In which De La Salle is presented as a great promoter of Christian instruction and education for poor and neglected youth; various trials follow him on every side, giving the occasion for several new foundations.*

Jesus Christ declared, *Unless the grain of wheat dies, it brings forth no fruit.* The truth of these words finds confirmation, first of all, in the one who pronounced them; it was his death which gave back life to the human race; his cross is the key to the kingdom of heaven. Once he was nailed to it, he drew all things to himself; he made the very instrument of his sacrifice the trophy of his victory. His members must follow in the footsteps of their leader. The more they die to themselves, the more his Spirit gives them life. Death to nature procures for them the life of grace. Persecution, while purifying their virtues, makes them bear fruit, grow, and multiply.

In fact, it was the persecution which dispersed the Apostles that made these conquerors known to the whole universe. By forcing them to wander from city to city, it led them to bring the faith, the Gospel, and the name of Jesus Christ to every nation of the globe. What the Church witnessed at its birth has been repeated in every succeeding century. The individual members of this great Mystical Body find no other principle at the origin of their spiritual progress. They grow and wax strong, like him, through contact with the cross. The choicest plants in the new land, the kingdom of heaven, are rooted on Calvary and grow only in the shadow of the cross. They thrive only insofar as they are watered by the blood which the nails, the scourges, and the thorns draw from the Savior's veins.

The cross, which tests the virtue of the saints, also perfects their undertakings. At the very time when the enemy of the human race seeks to eradicate the plant that the heavenly Father has placed in the field of his Church, his almighty hand sustains it with even greater power and helps it strike even deeper roots. As we shall see in this

third book, the whirlwind of persecution brought the Institute, along with its Founder, to various cities of France, with De La Salle leaving behind him Christian Schools in all those places from which he was obliged to flee.

## CHAPTER I

*De La Salle, forced to leave the Grande Maison, settles in the Faubourg Saint Antoine in 1703; persecution follows him there and obliges him to withdraw.*

The frequent and dangerous visits that the enemy of the servant of God incited his emissary to pay to the novitiate at the Grande Maison had wearied the Brothers, put their patience to a severe test, and at the end, become so intolerable that for some time they had been begging the one who was the real target of these vexations to give ground and seek peace somewhere else. Although the Founder's enemy had in vain exhausted all his artifices against the saintly priest, he had succeeded only too well in sowing discord among his disciples, and the unfortunate result had been that eight or nine of the principal Brothers had left the Society. The others, more firmly attached to their vocation and having perhaps less talent but more virtue than the deserters, witnessed their misfortune, feared to imitate them, and sought to shield themselves against similar temptations.

De La Salle did not share the apprehensions of his disciples. He was very fond of the Grande Maison, where he lived along with them, because he found it to be well adapted to community life. It really seemed to have been built just for his community. Located near one of the gates of the metropolis, in a spot affording plenty of fresh air, and spacious enough with its large gardens and courtyards, it was still far removed from the noise of the city and favored all the Founder's inclinations. If he had been in a position to select in Paris or in its environs a house suited to his tastes, this one would have been his choice.

The house had once been occupied by a group of nuns called Our Lady of the Ten Virtues. Their order had been founded by Blessed Jeanne de France, whose portrait was painted on one of the walls, along with that of Père Gabriel *Maria de Jesus*, a Discalced Carmelite, who had been the spiritual director of the nuns. These portraits were still to be seen during the time the Brothers occupied the

building. Underneath the chapel was a subterranean vault where the nuns were buried. For a long time, De La Salle had wanted to own a house in Paris in a commodious location where the novitiate could be established. Since the capital of the kingdom was likewise its center, he wanted to make it the headquarters of his Society for a number of reasons which are easily surmised.

At the time of which we speak, this house was for sale. It would have been easy for anyone less poor than the Superior of the Brothers to purchase it. For a long time, the proprietor had been urging the Founder to sign a contract of purchase and was willing to let him have it for 45,000 livres, although the property was worth at least 100,000. In fact, the person who finally bought it for the first-mentioned figure was able to resell it shortly thereafter for double the money. But where could the pious Founder find the sum asked? His poverty made it out of the question for him even to think of it. He did not dare to approach God with his desire for such an expensive house, and he limited himself to praying and having others pray to the God of all goodness to provide him with a fit shelter for his novitiate.

## De La Salle's prayers are heard but thwarted by his enemy

With this in mind and from the time they had first gone to live in the Grande Maison, De La Salle had instituted a special procession at which he assisted every day, vested in his surplice. It took place after the recitation of the Little Office of the Most Blessed Virgin and in the garden when weather permitted. They sang the psalms, *The earth is the Lord's, and its fullness*, the *Miserere*, and the litany of the Most Blessed Virgin, followed by the *Memorare* and the prayers of the Church, *O God whose Providence*. . . . and *God who art offended by sin*. . . . His prayers and those of the community were heard. A certain individual, inspired by heaven, left him in his will the sum of 50,000 livres for the express purpose of establishing a novitiate. But who could believe it? The influential enemy of the servant of God succeeded in getting hold of this money and deprived the legitimate legatee of it, as we shall explain farther on.

For the servant of God, this house was something like the Promised Land was for Moses. Then, on the very point of taking possession, De La Salle saw himself deprived of it. Yet it would seem that heaven had indeed intended it for him, because when he had taken it over, it was neglected and in disrepair, and it returned to this condition in a short while after he left. The one who bought it so cheaply

was not able to adapt it to his requirements, so he sold it, and its last owner neglected the property so much that it has become entirely desolate. True, common gossip maintains that the place is haunted. This has given the house a bad name and may be one reason why it remains unoccupied. However, the ghosts never bothered the Brothers; only after the Brothers' departure did the ghosts begin to cause problems for the new inhabitants, as we shall relate.

## The lease lost, De La Salle is allowed to remain a short time

So, the pious legacy, which had so opportunely come to De La Salle for the purchase of a house he so much longed to have, fell through. This left him and his community on the street, so to speak, for the house was sold, and the purchaser told De La Salle that he had to leave. That new misfortune happened about seven months after the difficulties that had embroiled De La Salle with the archbishop. Although he had been restored to the prelate's good graces, he had not been able to conclude peace with the enemy who had declared war on him. He found at least some advantage in having to give up a house which heaven had so visibly intended for him and which his enemy had so unjustly deprived him of, for the move placed considerable distance between them and kept the enemy's emissary away from the Brothers.

A fresh problem arose. Where could the Founder go on leaving the Grande Maison? The servant of God was caught in a difficult situation, for the new proprietor wanted the Brothers out of his house as soon as possible, so that he could lease it to others. He, therefore, insisted that the Brothers and their Superior must get out. The latter did not know where to turn, for he was at the end of his resources. But Divine Providence, which never abandoned them, arranged things so that nobody offered to rent the house.

De La Salle, taking advantage of this delay, begged the new proprietor, a worthy man, to give him time to look for another house suitable for his Brothers. The owner agreed and did not even ask him to pay rent for the time he remained. The only conditions he placed were that the Brothers should not gather the fruit from the large orchard and that they should give lodging to the gardener and his small family. The gardener, eager to look out for his master's interests as well as for his own, chose for his lodging a spot which gave him an uninterrupted view of the orchard, and there he established himself as a sort of sentinel to keep close watch over the fruit.

## The house, reputed to be haunted, proves difficult to rent

It would seem that this unflattering suspicion with regard to so mortified a community was not to the liking of the ghosts who, it was said, put in an appearance from time to time. They undertook to make the gardener and his family move out without delay. The fact was that his choice of that particular section in which to live was a source of considerable annoyance for the Brothers. Apparently, the ghosts were zealous for regularity, and were displeased that a family of lay people had come to interfere with it.

According to the account left by two virtuous but perhaps somewhat naive Brothers, it was a Sister Saint Fiacre, one of the nuns buried in the vault beneath the chapel, who made the most racket. She was spending her purgatory there, as she herself revealed to the two Brothers when she told them her name. They saw her often and spoke with her. The two good Brothers believed that they did so and would have been shocked had anyone relegated their visions and conversations to the realm of reveries and fairy tales. It was, no doubt, to put their imaginations to rest that De La Salle said a *Requiem* Mass for the repose of the soul of that religious and had all the Brothers receive Communion for the same intention. However, all their prayers did not banish her from the place. She still appeared to the two faithful believers.

The very first night, she caused great commotion in the room occupied by the new guests, whom she did not regard with a favorable eye; it was always at night that the living saw the dead come back among them. The shades of night are more propitious than broad daylight to inspire dreams or to make them seem more plausible. Before the Sister's ghost made any noise, she would let these good people go to bed quietly, hoping to enjoy a restful night. She would start her operations when they had scarcely shut their eyes. She woke them up by upsetting everything in the room so that they could not sleep any longer. Everything was turned topsy-turvy: dishes, sideboards, chairs, clothespresses, and other pieces of furniture. She did more than that. After having maliciously surprised those unbidden guests in the darkness when they were first falling asleep, she took their little baby and laid him down in the middle of the room. That new occurrence made those people find the night very long indeed, frightened as they were half to death. They waited only until day returned in order to clear out.

Still, daylight sometimes brings back common sense by curing excessive fear or an overactive imagination. The gardener, who with

daylight recovered some of his courage, resolved to sleep soundly the next night, hoping that he would experience no unpleasant dreams or that he would at least be better prepared to withstand the visits of a ghost. But in vain did he propose to fight it out with the phantom. He had to give in and yield the place without delay. He then moved to some rooms above the stables that were behind the main wing of the building, a long way from where the Brothers lodged. The ghost, satisfied after the retreat of the gardener, left him alone.

This poor fellow, having been severely punished for wanting to intrude among the Brothers and for having suspected their honesty, was no longer tempted to stand watch over them and was even happier to leave their quarters than they were to have him go. The ghost, the friend of the Brothers, wished to indicate her displeasure when they finally left and tried as best she could to prevent their leaving. While they were all looking on, she shook the last wagon carrying their furniture for the length of time it takes to say a *Miserere* and did it so violently that the conveyance was about to topple over. At least that is what some of the Brothers thought they saw while the wagon stood at the door with nobody anywhere around it.

## De La Salle moves to the Faubourg Saint Antoine in 1703

Having taken advantage of the new owner's charity for about six weeks, De La Salle finally left the Grande Maison on 20 August 1703 and went to occupy another, much less convenient building on the rue de Charonne in the Faubourg Saint Antoine, not far from the convent of the Sisters of the Cross. The expense occasioned by the move, which was considerable because of the distance between the two houses, left his poorest of communities a prey to real misery. The holy Founder had rented the new dwelling with the advice and consent of the pastor of Saint Paul's parish, to which the Faubourg Saint Antoine then belonged. When he had gone to pay his respects to the pastor and to ask for his approval, De La Salle had been received most cordially. The pastor knew of the pious Founder and was delighted to have him in his parish. He agreed with and approved his project and told him very frankly that while he was not in favor of new establishments and had in fact turned several away from his parish, he wished to go on record as favoring this one and would grant it his patronage.

It does not seem that De La Salle took a lease on that house, where he remained only about a year and a half. It was as though he could foresee that he would have to leave it before long. Nor did he

request permission to celebrate Mass there, either because he was inspired not to do so or because he had at his disposal, just across the street, the chapel belonging to the Sisters of the Cross, where he said Mass and whither he brought the Brothers to hear it and to receive Communion on the appointed days. Distance did not prevent the Brothers teaching in the schools from spending their Sundays and feast days at the novitiate, as had been customary. The fervor that filled them on those occasions and the joy they felt in being under the eyes of their beloved father made the long trip from one end of the Faubourg Saint Germain to the farther end of the Faubourg Saint Antoine seem short to them.

Although the holy priest was careful to remain in obscurity and never sought to attract special attention, an air of holiness distinguished him, especially when he stood at the altar. His fervor at such times betrayed his humility, and by disclosing the piety which shone on his countenance, it revealed that he was one of God's favored friends. The Sisters of the convent did not take long to notice this. Majesty, piety, and recollection accompanied him to the altar and by making them understand who the unknown priest was, inspired them with a vehement desire to profit by his presence. At first, the curiosity so natural to Sisters made them eager to attend his Mass and see him celebrate. For them he was a prodigy of devotion, renewed day after day, which stirred up their own fervor. They fancied that they beheld an angel exercising the sacred function. Later, several of them wished to place themselves under his spiritual direction and earnestly begged for this favor.

## The Sisters' charity toward the Brothers

Such a request was not much to the pious Founder's liking. He had always been reluctant to assume the spiritual direction of outsiders, especially of nuns, whose guidance required more leisure than the government of his Community left him. But these good Sisters obliged him, in a sense, to grant them out of gratitude a favor which he might have found many good reasons for refusing. This charitable group of Sisters showed itself the main resource of the new Institute and its principal source of funds from 1703 until De la Salle left for the south of France in 1711. That was how Divine Providence supplied the needs of the one who abandoned himself to God's care. God is admirable in his designs and incomprehensible in the means he uses to sanctify his servants. De La Salle, abandoned by his best and oldest friends, found new ones whom he had not previously known, when

he took refuge in one of the remotest corners of Paris. Obliged like the prophet Elias to flee before persecution, he found these Sisters who seemed to have received from God the order to nourish his own, just as the widow of Sareptha had been predestined to feed Elias.

Those charitable religious women did not give the servant of God time to explain his needs. They spontaneously offered their help when they were informed by various persons of the Brothers' necessities, and they gave him abundant alms to provide for his family, which had been transplanted from one end of the city to the other and which, unknown and unappreciated, was suffering all the privations attendant on poverty. The generosity of these Sisters followed De La Salle wherever he went with his sons. Persecution, which sought him out everywhere, did not take long to drive him from the Faubourg Saint Antoine, after having made him leave the Faubourg Saint Germain. The charity of the Sisters did not limit itself to their own neighborhood, and the departure of the servant of God did not cause it to dry up. Distance did not bring about any change in the dispositions of their hearts.

Even the disasters and calamities brought on in 1709 by famine and the prolonged winter did not diminish the generosity of the Sisters of the Cross. The Founder found in them an assured source of help to keep the Brothers from dying when hunger and cold threatened their lives. In those dark days, these saintly women used their resources to help a Community reduced to the last extremity. As if they had resolved to make their own funds common between them, they shared all they had with the saintly priest. The novitiate was then at Saint Yon, just outside the gates of Rouen, and the novices were suffering complete abandonment and were prey to the deepest want. In so rich a city, hearts and purses were closed to men who for several years had been gratuitously serving the children of the poor. No one took pity on them; they met with nothing but rejection and scorn from the great whose charity they humbly solicited. They would have perished of cold and hunger if De La Salle had left them any longer a prey to the forgetful and hard hearts of the public.

In Paris, where virtue reigns at the same time as vice, a goodly number of the inhabitants practice truly munificent charity with open and generous hearts. Although it is the showplace of all the distresses of the kingdom, which seem concentrated there, the capital appeared to the holy priest a more secure refuge against the hardships of the times than did a provincial city like Rouen, which is wealthy indeed, but where alms drop from the hands of the rich only in strict measure after long seeking and with great deliberation. So he brought his

novices back to Paris from Saint Yon, hoping to find in the capital hearts more easily touched by the needs of his children. In this he was not disappointed, because he secured from this one convent of the Sisters of the Cross more assistance than he had in the flourishing capital of Normandy.

When the servant of God was at the end of his resources, saying with a smile, *Let us go to the Cross*, he would make his way to his benefactresses and shortly would return bearing their liberalities. As soon as those kind religious saw him, they did not give him time to open his mouth to explain his predicament but hastened to share what they had with him, and they did so more in proportion to their charity than to their wealth. This recognition we give here is only what is due to such a charitable group of religious women in this history of the Founder of the Christian Schools.

## Terrible persecution by the schoolmasters and writing masters

Once De La Salle had taken up residence in the Faubourg Saint Antoine, he did not remain undisturbed for very long. The schoolmasters declared war on him again with renewed fury, and this time successfully, because the parish priest of Saint Sulpice no longer shielded the Founder from their attacks. It was De La Chétardie who had given orders that the Christian Schools should admit indiscriminately all children who requested gratuitous instruction. His order was right, for who can distinguish in a great city the families which can afford to pay the teachers' fees from those that cannot? But it was precisely the decision to admit to the Gratuitous Schools all the children who wished to enter that disturbed the Parisian schoolmasters. That in one hundred poor children who frequented the Christian Schools, three or four might be found belonging to families in easy circumstances was all the reason the masters needed to cause trouble for the Brothers and pitilessly to close down all their classes. The schoolmasters' pretensions might have been judged reasonable by the public if, while requiring fees from the children of well-to-do families whom they instructed, they had been willing to teach gratuitously the ones unable to pay.

But did they ever do so? They would have been very reluctant to admit to their schools a crowd of children who could bring nothing with them but vermin. They would have thought that such charity might injure their own interests by driving away from their classes the children who brought in all the profit. If the schoolmasters had been willing, out of a sense of equity, to apply their own rules to the

Gratuitous Schools, they would have concluded that their own establishments were not being harmed by those of the Brothers, since the latter were filled only by the children with whom their own paying pupils would not associate.

However, as people grow suspicious when their financial interests are threatened and forge vain and fantastic prejudices for themselves, the schoolmasters remained convinced that the Brothers were cutting into their own revenues, because they taught all children free. Consequently, they always entertained against them a certain amount of ill feeling, which was ready to break out on the slightest provocation. Held in check by the influence of De La Chétardie, who had the authority to enforce the orders he had given, the schoolmasters did not dare cause any trouble; when they had ventured to do so, they had been made to regret it and thereafter kept quiet. They remained firmly resolved, however, to reopen hostilities as soon as the death or the disaffection of the Brothers' protector might give them an opening. They thought they perceived such an opportunity in the indifference that the pastor of Saint Sulpice began to exhibit toward the new Institute. He had let the novitiate leave the Grande Maison and had not tried to keep it in his parish. He no longer had much to do with the Superior of the Brothers and seemed to have lost all confidence in him. His generosity toward the Community had all but dried up, and his zeal for the Gratuitous Schools seemed exhausted.

All this the schoolmasters learned through the grapevine. After having verified these facts, they realized that they no longer had anything to fear from the man against whom they had most to be on guard and who had been the Brothers' staunchest defender. They did even more. To sound out his dispositions, they sent a numerous delegation to him and omitted nothing to make him feel sorry for them. They explained that the protection which he had up to then given to the Gratuitous Schools had caused the latter to be filled by children from their own schools. By offering free instruction to the poor children, he had taken the bread from the mouths of the schoolmasters and their families, thus increasing the number of the poor in the parish. We do not know how De La Chétardie replied, but if we may surmise, basing our opinion on what happened later, he seems to have listened to them favorably. By not opposing their schemes, he gave them free rein to dare all and to undertake whatever they liked.

The new campaign began with a complaint addressed to the lieutenant of police, dated January 1704. The schoolmasters[1] complained of the activities carried on by De La Salle, a priest, and by several other individuals whose Superior he claimed to be. It was charged that

these men, without any authorization or qualifications, conducted various schools under the pretext of charity. The complainants begged that the abuses which had been introduced to their detriment be stopped. They added that even if it were true that the Brothers had the right to teach in the Charity Schools, they should be obliged to admit none but the truly poor students. Far from abiding by this rule, however, they had admitted to the more than twenty schools[2] that they conducted in Paris and its faubourgs all the children who sought admission, whatever the social class, zone, or parish to which they might belong.

To prove their assertions, the schoolmasters joined to their petition a list of the names, professions, and addresses of the parents of the students who, according to them, did not need to have recourse to charity. The main ones were these: a man living on the revenues from his investments, two surgeons, one butcher, a locksmith, a wine merchant, a grocer, a jeweler, and two restaurant owners. All of these, they claimed, were people in easy circumstances.

I suppose that the schoolmasters had inventoried the possessions of all those people and, penetrating their family secrets, had made the heads of the households give them an exact account of their income. Without such information provided in due form, how could the schoolmasters assure the judge that these people who, they claimed, were in easy circumstances were actually such? How often do the walls of a house disguise seriously straitened circumstances which remain unknown to the public? How many indigent people suffer in secret the hardships of poverty while having a reputation of being well-off? This petition, filled with false allegations, was nevertheless believed. Consequently, the lieutenant of police allowed the schoolmasters to cite the Brothers and their Superior before the court. This was done without delay.

De La Salle could have easily defended himself by pointing out 1) that he was authorized by His Eminence to direct a Community of Brothers for teaching in Christian and Gratuitous Schools; 2) that this authorization made him their Superior and empowered him to open the Gratuitous Schools; 3) that it was not possible either for him or for

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1. The complaint was lodged by the writing masters, who were under the protection of the police, not by the schoolmasters, who were under the diocesan precentor. The judgments of the court described in this chapter applied to the writing masters.

2. The figure is erroneous. The Brothers did not have more than six or seven schools in Paris at the time. Possibly the number refers to classes rather than to schools.

the Brothers to identify from the large number of poor children who came seeking a free education those who might belong to fairly well-to-do families; 4) that even if it were possible to do this, he could not judge fairly and equitably about their financial position without having made a juridical inquiry into their possessions and income; 5) that since he had no right to make any such inquiry, it would be highly rash of him to pass judgment on a matter so hidden, private, and difficult to determine; 6) that if he and the Brothers undertook to discriminate between rich and poor children, not only would they run the risk of making mistakes, but they would also be open to all sorts of insults and outrages; 7) that the fact that some people are called surgeons, masons, butchers, locksmiths, wine merchants, and so on does not imply that all of them are, in fact, in easy circumstances; many poor people exercise these same roles; 8) that some of those listed as wealthy might have large families to provide for, something that soon exhausts the resources of those who live by a trade or who have only a limited income; 9) that illness, business reverses, and other misfortunes bring every day to the poorhouse people who belong to all those professions and who, moreover, are both skilled and diligent workers. 10) He would have embarrassed the schoolmasters a good deal if he had asked them whether they were willing to go bond for the fortune they attributed to those whom they had listed among the rich and whether they were ready to pay out of their own purses what might be wanting to those people whose wealth they had exaggerated. 11) As a final argument, he might have suggested that there was little likelihood that parents who were rich or well-off would be willing to send their children to schools frequented by the sons of soldiers, hod carriers, wheelbarrow pushers, and other members of the lowest classes of society.

## De La Salle is again condemned without defending himself

Such replies, so apt to reduce the schoolmasters to silence, were not employed by a man who felt that in the circumstances, he should say nothing and let those speak up whose responsibility it was to do so. De La Salle believed that the cause of the Gratuitous Schools was not one that concerned him personally but was one affecting the relationship of the public and the poor. Therefore he felt that it was not up to him to answer the summons, and he declined to appear in court. The writing masters[3] did not fail to make the most of this inaction, and they pressed the charges vigorously. As neither De La Salle nor any of his followers appeared in court, they were condemned by default on

22 February 1704. The sentence forbade them to admit to the Charity Schools any children but those whose fathers were genuine paupers and certified as such, and nothing was to be taught them except what was considered proper to their families' social standing. In addition, De La Salle was condemned to pay the costs and a fine of fifty livres; the same fine was levied against each of the Brothers.

This sentence, which gave the writing masters everything they wanted and which caused so much injury to the Charity Schools, did not intimidate the holy Founder and did not keep the Brothers from proceeding with their teaching as usual. We do not know whether or not De La Salle ever paid the fine. In all likelihood, the writing masters had to be content with the hope of collecting it some day and had to wait for the reimbursement of the costs until the Brothers' fortunes took a turn for the better. For the time being, the Brothers, more deserving of pity than of envy, gave their rivals no hope of recovering these expenses for the lawsuit from a Community which lived on alms and whose extreme poverty placed it out of reach of any pecuniary exactions.

Things remained as they were for the next three months, after which the writing masters presented to the lieutenant of police a new complaint, dated 7 June 1704. In it they reiterated all the accusations already made against De La Salle and his disciples. In addition, they charged him with infringing the terms of the judgment rendered on 22 February. They asked that the sentence be carried out with a fine of 500 livres for damages and interest levied against each of the guilty parties. In addition, they demanded that De La Salle be immediately fined 2,000 livres for damages and interest done to the community of writing masters, on account of the considerable injustices he had caused them. Finally, they demanded that all parents owning property and consequently not authorized to benefit by the establishment of the Charity Schools should be forbidden to send their children to such schools or to have them taught by any persons other than those publicly authorized to fulfill such functions.

They further asked that the new sentence be publicized by being affixed in public places wherever necessary and that the culprits be cited to appear in court. All this was carried out. The new citation, however, did not succeed in making De La Salle break his silence or appear in court. The case being that of the public and of the poor, he

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3. Blain suddenly writes "writing masters," whereas up to this point, he had been erroneously calling the adversaries of the Founder at this stage "schoolmasters."

felt that it was up to the magistrates themselves, responsible for safeguarding and preserving the common good, to defend it. Perhaps he thought that since he lacked all influential friends and highly placed protectors, the courts would inevitably condemn him if he appeared and tried to defend the rights of the poor in his own name. His silence resulted in complete victory for his enemies. They finally obtained what they had wanted all along: the condemnation of De La Salle and the Brothers by default. The sentence issued against them on 22 February was confirmed. For having violated its terms, De La Salle was fined 100 livres; each Brother teaching in the schools was fined 50 livres for damages and interest, to be paid to the guild of the writing masters, in addition to the costs of the proceedings.

Fathers whose children did not need to frequent the Charity Schools were forbidden to send their offspring there to learn how to write, under penalty of paying fines, costs, damages, and interest to the said community, that is, of the writing masters. In addition, Sieur[4] de La Salle was ordered to remove within three days the sign which he had placed over the door of his house in the Faubourg Saint Antoine—indicating that in it he was training Brothers or schoolmasters—without authorization to do so by any duly registered letters patent. The sign which so offended the eyes of the writing masters bore only the simple words, *Brothers of the Christian Schools*. It had been there ever since the school opened. The sentence of the court was immediately posted in the public squares in all the sections of Paris where the Brothers had classes. The posters were no longer there the next day, thanks to the efforts of several zealous persons, indignant over the harm this sentence had done to the most necessary initiative of all for poor, neglected Christian children.

In vain the writing masters multiplied their expenses and demanded fines and reimbursement from a Community and a man who, because of their extreme poverty, were in no position to pay anything. However, if they could get no money from the Brothers, they at least enjoyed the churlish satisfaction of sending people to attack them with ladders, hammers, and other tools used in pillage. The sign was torn down and the benches, tables, books, and all the other material used for teaching drawing, reading, and writing to over 200 young men on Sunday and feast day afternoons were carted off in wagons, all without meeting any resistance. De La Salle and the Brothers witnessed the vandalizing of their establishment without complaining or trying to stop the marauders.

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4. The address is insulting; Monsieur is the proper address to a priest.

Quite soon, the noise that the pillage created alerted the Sisters of the Cross and enabled them from their convent to take notice of what was going on. In vain did their tears flow unchecked on beholding such a spectacle. The sight was indeed unusual. A charitable institution, having nothing but the public good as its object, uniquely dedicated to the gratuitous instruction of poor children, was requited for its efforts by being vandalized. It was indeed a spectacle deserving tears, and they were not spared. People looked on with astonishment and compassion as the house was besieged as though by the enemy and then devastated as though it were conquered territory. Right-minded people bewailed what was happening. The poor, those most directly interested, realized that it was they, rather than the Brothers, who were being victimized. But they did not dare make a public outcry or manifest their complaints outwardly. They joined indignation to their complaints, and it was the public, so deeply interested in the fate of the Charity Schools, that caused those who had won the case in court to lose it in the long run because of such violent and unjustified behavior.

The Sunday School, after enjoying remarkable success for some six years, came to an end as a result of this devastation. The good results it produced cause its loss to be regretted even to this day by all those who love what is good and who care about the salvation of souls. Eagerness to learn drawing, geometry, mathematics, penmanship, arithmetic, and reading drew to it from all over Paris a large number of young men, belonging to various trades, who had neither the money to pay for such schooling nor the time to devote to it except on Sunday and feast day afternoons. They reaped the double advantage of becoming better Christians while becoming better workers, for pious exercises sanctified their hearts after their minds had been cultivated by good teaching.

These young men were kept away from dangerous companionship, cabarets, and other dens of debauchery. They learned how to participate in religious services. They lost all taste for vice while acquiring a liking for piety. The salutary instructions they received opened their eyes to the evil of their past life and inspired them with horror for their sinful ways. General confessions and the reception of the sacraments were likewise promoted, and the final result was a life changed for the better. That is what the public lost when the Sunday School was ruined. Jealousy, rather than pecuniary considerations, had led the writing masters to seek its destruction, because there is no doubt that none of the young workingmen who came from far and near to this school had any desire, let alone the chance, to spend part

of their time and money for lessons that they would have had to pay for.

Hence the complaint formulated by the writing masters in their petition against this school was totally unfounded. According to them, it was causing them serious financial loss. What loss could they suffer if the Sunday School did have in its classes these youths who had neither money to give them nor time to attend classes which are open only on working days? The regret occasioned by the disappearance of that good work, the Sunday School, has not yet vanished from Paris. People still desire very earnestly to see it re-established. Every now and then, passersby stop the Brothers and ask when they plan to reopen the Sunday School.

But all the troubles fomented by the writing masters were only the prelude to the gathering tempest which soon burst upon the Founder and his Institute. De La Salle could foresee that the attack on the schools in the Faubourg Saint Antoine would extend with even greater violence to those in the Faubourg Saint Germain. He prepared for another onslaught with invincible courage, and when it came, it found him as immovable as a rock.

## CHAPTER II

*The Brothers are called to Marseille to conduct Charity Schools, then to Darnétal, near Rouen, and finally to Rouen itself.*

The newly formed Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, almost strangled to death in Paris, went elsewhere in search of breathing space. The winds of persecution drove De La Salle from Paris and brought his Institute to various places: Marseille, Rouen, and Dijon, three of the most flourishing cities in the kingdom. We have already related the beginnings of the school in Avignon. In a short time, it became so well known that it led to the opening of an establishment in Marseille.

The order, the silence, and the modesty which could be observed in the Brothers' classes, with a school population made up of naturally boisterous, giddy, and stubborn children incapable of sustained attention, were sights people never grew tired of. The townsfolk came to the school to satisfy their curiosity and to see the urchins, so prone to cutting up, soon become recollected and attentive to the lessons

that were given to them with such great economy of words. Strangers in Avignon were led to visit the schools when they heard of the unusual spectacle they offered. Friends brought them to see for themselves, if they appeared to possess a certain amount of piety and might be inclined to further the interests of religion.

Messieurs Morelet and Jourdan, two wealthy merchants of Marseille, who were also gentlemen of exemplary piety, had the pleasure of seeing with their own eyes and of verifying whether all that they had heard in praise of the Brothers was true and whether or not there was anything exaggerated in the reputation they enjoyed. Having witnessed in person the way the classes were arranged, the discipline in force among the students, and the assiduity of the teachers, they remained greatly edified by the atmosphere of piety which pervaded all of the school activities, and they were delighted over the new method of teaching with so few words and by the use of signals. Accordingly, they felt inspired to help Marseille share in the good fortune of Avignon.

## The foundation in Marseille

When they went home, these two gentlemen spoke of their project to M. Trovillard, who is at present vicar-general of Arles. He advised them to set up a committee of about a dozen persons to work together to raise the 400 livres a year needed for the living expenses of two Brothers. The proposal was approved as soon as made, and it was carried out without delay. De La Salle immediately sent from Paris two Brothers, who on their arrival opened a school in the parish of Saint Laurent for the children of the sailors. They found a small building which was quite adequate and which was donated to them by one of the founders. The annual support of the two Brothers came out of the resources of the charitable gentlemen who had procured them; to make sure that their support would continue, most of them took care to leave enough capital in their wills.

Monsieur Jourdan did not long survive the foundation of the school which he and Morelet had started, but he did leave it two zealous protectors: namely, his father and his brother, the prior of the parish of Saint Laurent. On his deathbed, the prior entreated them to take the interests of this school to heart and to replace him in order to assure its progress. They have done so with great zeal in imitation of his example.

That school, opened in 1704, just when the greatest upheavals were threatening De La Salle and his new Society, succeeded just as all the others did, but for a long time the parish of Saint Laurent was

the only one that benefited by the Brothers' efforts. Marseille, rich and populous as it is, where it should have been easy to multiply such necessary foundations, had only one Brothers' school for sixteen years. More than once, plans were made to found others, plans which were actually attempted at the time De La Salle visited the city, but only after his death did the project succeed. God willed that the saintly Founder should water this opulent city with his sweat and sow in it the seeds of his virtues and sufferings before his Community could reap a harvest there.

## Additional foundations come later[5]

From 1704 to 1720, the school of Saint Laurent was the only one the Brothers had in Marseille. Only after a horrible pestilence which carried off the greater part of the inhabitants was it decided to establish other schools. The epidemic, which caused new ravages and presented new spectacles of desolation day after day, did not spare the two Brothers. One died, and the other, having returned by a sort of miracle from the very jaws of death, employed the life God had given back to him in serving the people in his area stricken by the pestilence.

Then the illustrious and charitable prelate, Monsieur H. F. Xavier de Belsunce de Castel Moron, who had been acting in Marseille as Saint Charles had acted in Milan during the pestilence there, resolved to put the crowning touch on all the examples of charity and virtue which he had given during this time of horror in the city by establishing new Charity Schools in the four other parishes of the metropolis. Several pious persons contributed thereto, M. Morelet among others. This virtuous merchant, who placed the largest share of his wealth in reserve for eternity by devoting it to good works, had always shown outstanding zeal for the instruction of youth. He had already founded in his own parish a school which was called *La Major* and had put an ecclesiastic in charge of it. Subsequently, he found another position for the cleric and entrusted the school to two Brothers, after setting aside a sufficient revenue for their upkeep, which he later augmented by forty livres a year.

5. That is, after the Founder's death.

## The Brothers involved in the hospice for the poor

All the parishes of Marseille were then provided with Brothers engaged in the instruction of the poor children of the city; it was only right that those children living at the town hospice should be afforded the same privilege. Some years later, in fact, the administrators of that institution took steps to provide such an advantage to those children. For that purpose, they invoked the influence of their pious bishop and enlisted the help of his zeal, ever favorable to the instruction of the ignorant. The project, however, presented various difficulties: in the mind of the Brother Superior at the time, a number of objections and dangers militated against his desire to cooperate with the administrators of the establishment. He was afraid that if the Brothers became involved with outsiders having a different mentality and a different profession, they would become the objects either of their envy and aversion if they took part in the governing of the establishment or of their scorn and criticism if they had no positions of authority. He feared even more that Brothers mingling with the secular people in this institution might, through too close a contact, become overly familiar with them, imitate them, and become like them. When Jews live in proximity with the Gentiles, they imitate their example and learn to live like them. It is precisely what too often happens to those who by vocation are supposed to remain apart from the world but who find themselves in close contact with secular people. Little by little, they lose the spirit of retirement, recollection, and mortification and instead become filled with the spirit of the world, which they had so much trouble in getting rid of.

Still, the gentlemen on the committee, desiring with such laudable eagerness to see the Brothers assume the care and education of the children in this institution, insisted so strongly that the Superior could not turn them down. On their side, they were kind enough to agree to the conditions he specified—wise precautions destined to keep the Brothers in perfect regularity. After all, only time would show what the Brothers' virtue had to fear in a situation which, while conforming to certain rules, was still not a religious Community and what good they could do in an establishment where order, subordination, and piety had not, as a rule, struck deep roots into hearts and where servile fear, human respect, and self-interest were the primary motives that actuated those who lived and labored there.

If the Brothers wished to avoid envy and jealousy, which are found everywhere, they would need to secure the goodwill of those in charge without flattering their passions, to uphold their authority

over the children whom they instructed, so that nobody could undertake to deprive them of it, to win the respect even of those whom they could not win over, and to live a life of solitude in the midst of boisterous and undisciplined youngsters. To do all this, the Brothers needed to act with great caution and singular prudence. In any event, if the passions of others and human malice made it impossible for them to do any good in such a place where there was so much to be done and obliged them to withdraw from a situation which they had entered only with reluctance, the experience would be a proof for them that their special charism was not for work in such poorhouses.

What we have been saying demonstrates the enthusiasm that the city of Marseille has displayed for the founding of Gratuitous Schools. Sixteen Brothers, working in various sections of the town, are teaching the children of the poor with great success. Their needs are provided for by foundations which, at the present time, the city council and the magistrates have in their charity undertaken to augment by an annual grant of 800 livres. With that in mind, the officials drew up a petition to secure the court's approval and asked Brother Superior to present it to Cardinal de Fleury.

In addition, since the Brothers were too crowded in the house they occupied, the gentlemen belonging to the illustrious Confraternity of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, composed of the principal merchants of the town, provided them with a beautiful and commodious house, nearly completely furnished, which is called the House of the Confraternity of Our Lady of Perpetual Help. Finally, so that nothing might be lacking to provide the Brothers in Marseille with fully established status, in 1727 they were accepted by the bishop and the city authorities into the communal corps of religious institutes. I do not think there is now another city in France where the Brothers have more reason to feel satisfied than in Marseille. It is not surprising that they entertain for that city the sentiments of deep gratitude which they seek to turn to the city's advantage by their prayers and supplications to the Lord. This is all we have to say for the moment about the establishment of the Christian Schools in that city.

## In Paris, De La Salle receives invitations from Darnétal

Before following De La Salle to the capital of Normandy, where he will encounter new crosses and establish new foundations, we must return to him in the Faubourg Saint Antoine, where he grieved over the destruction of the establishment which the writing masters had just closed. Seeing that his Sunday School was ruined, the man of

God resolved to leave a house where he had nothing more to do and a city where he found only enemies. He foresaw that the storm would move over from the Faubourg Saint Antoine to the Faubourg Saint Germain and would cause the same havoc in the Brothers' schools there, since nobody seemed interested in opposing the machinations of his enemies.

The Founder had already received, on two occasions, letters inviting him to Rouen. He felt inclined to go there, and the situation in which he now found himself invited him to do so. His poverty, as stringent as ever, did not allow him to pay rent on a house he did not need. The furious assaults directed against his little congregation discouraged those who wished to enter. Persecution had frightened off most of the novices, so that only a few remained with him. To cap it all, De La Salle still owned the considerable pile of furnishings given to him by Madame Voisin, but he did not know where to store it all. Divine Providence, which never forgot him, inspired a pious person to let him use a large empty warehouse, where he stored most of the furniture. After having transported, as quietly as possible, the few items that he needed to the Brothers' house in the parish of Saint Sulpice, he went to live there with the novices, who were few indeed at the beginning of 1705.

He did not stay there very long, because an opportunity of leaving, which he longed for, soon presented itself. He was asked to send two Brothers to take charge of a school in the parish of Saint Roch. He was delighted with the invitation, sent the Brothers, and went to live with them, along with two or three priests; he always had several priests with him in the various places where he resided. That school did not last very long, only two or three years, and then young student teachers were put in place of the Brothers. The reason was that the Brothers were required to be present during the catechism lessons which the parish clergy taught in the church; they were supposed to keep order, silence, and discipline among the children. The idea was perhaps not such a bad one, but it was hardly appropriate for men bound to a regular life, who by fulfilling this function, were exposed to great distractions and had to omit many of their exercises of piety.

As far back as September 1704, De La Salle had received letters from Rouen requesting him to take charge of a school at Darnétal, a large village just outside Rouen. That locality was thickly populated and widely known for making cloth. It was there, many years previously, that Madame Maillefer had founded a Gratuitous School for girls. A schoolmaster for boys in the town was supported by gentlemen

belonging to the Congregation of the Jesuits.[6] The teacher had recently died, and they were looking for a replacement. Abbé Deshayes, a member of this sodality and presently the parish priest of Saint Sauveur, gave these gentlemen such a glowing account of the Brothers and of their Superior, whom he had known at the Seminary of Saint Sulpice, that he won their approval for his plan. Therefore they agreed to ask for two Brothers, if they would be satisfied with a stipend of fifty écus and the lodgings previously occupied by the deceased teacher.

Abbé Deshayes, who was asked to handle the negotiations, forwarded the proposal to the servant of God in Paris through M. Chardon de Lagny, a priest who resided in the community of the parish of Saint Sulpice, where he had charge of the converted Protestants in that parish, a mission he continued to fulfill until his death. Having been a Protestant himself, he knew all about such people. In fact, he carried out this ministry with zeal and success. He even composed seven or eight duodecimo volumes on many topics, very learnedly written and carefully researched. The one entitled *Treatise on Communion Under Both Species* is among the best he wrote; in it, he lays bare the deceit and bad faith of the Protestants, who claim that the use of both species is essential.

Only a man as detached from monetary considerations as De La Salle would have accepted such a proposal, for while asking him for two Brothers, they were really leaving him the responsibility of supporting them. They wanted two Brothers, yet they offered only the modest salary of the deceased teacher, which was barely enough for one man. Thus, when he agreed to their request, the servant of God had to rely on some other source of income than on the gentlemen of the Jesuit Congregation. He was right in so doing, for this foundation petered out a few years later, as we shall see. He counted only on Divine Providence, because he saw clearly that he would have to abandon his disciples to God's care if he wished to establish them in the capital of Normandy.

It is indeed amazing that today there are twelve of them, ten of them teaching in the Gratuitous Schools, who for the past thirty years have been keeping these schools operating on pure charity. It is even more amazing that in such a wealthy city, no one has thought of endowing these schools, multiplying them, or even trying to help them. Most amazing of all, the Brothers during all this time have been so generally and constantly abandoned to their poverty that the alms

6. Probably a sodality of former students of the Jesuits.

they have received have come from elsewhere. This is the only city in the kingdom where no attention has been paid to the need for the Brothers' schools and to the great contribution they make to the public weal. However, this place where they were so despised and neglected is the one which Divine Providence chose to be the theatre of the greatest blessings poured out on them, as we shall see.

Another difficulty might have hindered De La Salle from agreeing with the proposal made to him. He had always held to the inviolable rule of not accepting foundations in country places, because he considered these dangerous to the salvation of the Brothers. They might have found, in their isolation and away from the companionship and the example of the other Brothers, more liberty and more occasions for falling into relaxation. But this difficulty vanished as soon as the Founder learned more about the locality where his disciples were wanted. He found out that Darnétal is contiguous to Rouen and that the town is more wealthy and populous than many other places that call themselves cities. Moreover, De La Salle foresaw that once the Brothers were established at the gates of Rouen, they would soon enter the city itself and that they would be invited there as soon as people learned about their methods of teaching and educating the young.

In fact, De La Salle felt a holy desire to establish himself in Rouen; he had thought of that ever since the founding of his Institute. Rouen seemed, in a way, the root from which the Institute had sprung, and it was only fair that it should reap some benefit from it. M. Nyel had conducted the Charity Schools in Rouen before going to found the first one in Reims. It was the saintly Madame Maillefer who, while living in Rouen, had the idea of opening such schools in her native city and who had sent Nyel to undertake the project. It was, then, only natural that just as waters following their normal course always return to the sea from which they arose, the Brothers should come to take charge of the Christian Schools in the place where, so to speak, their Institute had been conceived.

## Opening of the school in Darnétal

Consequently, considering the city of Rouen as the origin of his Society, De La Salle thought he should serve it with generosity and entire disinterestedness. Unworried over food and clothing for his disciples, he agreed to everything requested by Monsieur Deshayes but with the specific reservation that the Brothers sent to Darnétal would limit themselves, as was the practice everywhere else, to their functions as teachers. He took this precaution because he feared that the Brothers

might be pressured into undertaking the various chores which the schoolmasters usually performed in country villages: singing the Offices, wearing the surplice, and assisting the parish priest in his ministry—all of which are functions forbidden to the Brothers by essential rules of their Institute. Any derogation from such rules would alter the Institute itself and modify its very nature. To that precaution, the wise Superior added a second: he sent a Brother to Darnétal to inspect the premises to see if they were adequate for a school and to reach an understanding with M. Deshayes about having the house and everything else ready. Once that was done, and after requesting the authorization of the archbishop of Rouen, De La Salle sent the two Brothers about the beginning of February 1705.

As soon as the school was opened, it was filled with students, and God's blessing entered along with them. Within two months, the good results were even more evident than they had been anywhere else. The reputation of the new school soon spread to Rouen. The zeal of certain worthy people was aroused, and they began to envy the neighboring village the advantage it possessed over the city. From then on, they resolved to establish the Brothers in Rouen, and that project was soon realized, as we shall see. It was what De La Salle had foreseen and even foretold. Hope had led him to accept the foundation at Darnétal, in spite of the minimal salary of fifty écus paid to the Brothers—and not very regularly at that. In fact, a few years later, the money stopped coming altogether. The people who had invited the Brothers neglected to provide for them, not only failing to pay the fifty écus but even declining to defray the cost of the major or minor repairs needed by the house. That was, people said, the penance deserved by the deceased parish priest of Longpaon for his revolt against the Constitution *Unigenitus*. But those who imposed such a penance on him did not seem to notice that it was not the appellant but the Brothers who had to suffer the consequences.

Since nothing happened but what De La Salle had foreseen and since in sending the Brothers to Darnétal, he had counted on God alone to provide for them, he considered that they had lost nothing in being deprived of their small salary, as long as they did not lose confidence in the Author of all good. With that in mind, he was unwilling to withdraw them from Darnétal when their salary was no longer paid. This school is still in operation today, even though its income is only seventy-five livres. The parish priest is deeply attached to the Brothers and has found ways to make up the difference by a collection taken up among the people every three months. The school is still as flourishing and well attended as it was at the beginning. No

sooner had it opened, as we have already mentioned, than it became an object of envy for Rouen, where its reputation spread and where the results it obtained spoke for it.

In the city, people began discussing the benefits of the Gratuitous Schools and the need for such establishments for the children of the poor, and steps were taken to secure them. The vicars-general were soon made aware of the interest and were urged to found some Charity Schools in Rouen. They thought well of the scheme and zealously recommended it to Monsieur Colbert, at that time the archbishop of Rouen. Fortunately, he had just arrived, toward the end of Lent, to confer Holy Orders. That prelate, who loved what was good and who judged more accurately than most what was solid and really worthwhile, appreciated the initiative at its true worth; next to the establishment of seminaries, no other good work outranked schools in his estimation. He showed that in his will, in which the only bequests he made went to his minor seminaries and to the community of schoolmistresses which he had established at Ernemont.[7] Those were the establishments he had at heart above all others. They were his own foundations, which he considered of the first importance, of superior rank; hence, they were the only ones he enriched with his liberalities.

Being well disposed toward all great undertakings, the archbishop cooperated with the project of his vicars-general. Their plan was approved as soon as it was proposed. There are undertakings which need neither time nor long discussions to find adherence. As soon as they are broached, they win over the minds and hearts of those who have a real religious spirit, because of the great advantages and the valuable results they promise. The only question remaining, therefore, was how to get the Brothers to Rouen as soon as possible.

Archbishop Colbert felt renewed zeal for the execution of this project when he beheld at his feet the Brothers from Darnétal, who had come to pay him their respects and beg for his blessing. Well disposed toward them on account of all the favorable reports he had heard about them, he welcomed them with great kindness and expressed the desire to have other Brothers for his See city. The Darnétal school, which was just beginning and was already producing such good results, promised more of the same for Rouen and hence made the archbishop eager to secure the Brothers. Thus, when inquiring after the Brothers' Superior, he asked if the Founder could send some Brothers to Rouen to open Gratuitous Schools there. As De La Salle desired this no less than Colbert did, the Brothers, who were aware of

7. Blain was the ecclesiastical superior of that diocesan community.

his wish, were not risking anything when they assured His Excellency that their Superior was indeed disposed to accede to his request.

## De La Salle is summoned to Rouen by the archbishop

On hearing their response, Archbishop Colbert ordered Abbé Couet, his right-hand man, to write to De La Salle, asking him to come at once to Rouen—before the departure of the prelate, who was due to leave on Easter Monday for his clergy conference—in order to confer with him about a school to be run by the Brothers. The holy Founder's determination to transfer the novitiate from Paris to Rouen was apparently no secret, since Couet mentioned it in his letter, saying that he hoped to have a chance to collaborate with him in all that concerned his good work.

That letter, so favorable to the pious Founder's plans, reached him at a time when nothing in the world could have been more agreeable to him, for it came when, rejected on all sides and driven from his last refuge, he did not know where to turn or where to go with the wreck of his novitiate. He had to disappear from Paris, from the eyes of his declared or his hidden enemies, to quell the animosity of the one and to dissipate the prejudices of the other. The Brothers at Darnétal also wrote to the Founder, telling him of the success their school was enjoying, of the pious projects that it had given rise to, and of their visit to the archbishop and their conversation with him. They urged him to come in person, as soon as possible, in order to conclude what had been so auspiciously begun. He did so, traveling to Rouen by stagecoach.

He had no trouble in concluding the affair with the prelate, who in what concerns good works was quite incapable of raising difficulties but would rather remove them. De La Salle departed again, almost as soon as he had arrived, and went back to Paris to inform the Brothers whom he planned to send. On his side, the archbishop took up the matter with Monsieur de Pontcarré, the president of the parliament of Normandy, in order to conclude with him the arrangements needed to bring the plan to success. The project won the unqualified approval of that great magistrate, who possesses a brilliant mind and an eminent piety. De Pontcarré promised to back the plan with all his authority and all the efforts inspired by his zeal. He certainly kept his word, for he made himself more the father than merely the protector of the Institute, as the sequel was to show.

Archbishop Colbert's intention was not to found new Gratuitous Schools for the Brothers to operate but to put them in charge of those

that already existed, which Nyel had once directed and which came under the control of the administrators of the town hospice. The plan involved a good deal of difficulty. Great as was the influence in his diocese possessed by the archbishop, the son of one of the most eminent ministers that France ever had,[8] and great as was the advantage that his dignity gave him in the meeting of the council over which he presided, he would have despaired of securing approval for his project if he had not been able to count on the authority, zeal, and eloquence of De Pontcarré.

That outstanding magistrate speaks with such facility, wit, and grace that it is difficult to resist him and not to be led where he wishes to bring you. Such was the powerful asset provided by the president that the prudent prelate wished to utilize. He thought it would suffice for the head of parliament to appear and to address the meeting of the administrators, in order to win a unanimous vote of the members. With that in mind, they called a meeting at which both men were present. The archbishop explained what he had in mind, and the president displayed the oratorical talent he possessed, urging the adoption of the measure.

## Opposition to the proposal of the archbishop

Who could believe that such a pious design, so advantageous to the public, was not approved by the administrators when it was laid before them by the two principal men on the board? Their presence and authority alone, the simple expression of their desires, would no doubt have won unanimous agreement if anything else but a good work had been at stake. I do not know what malignant fatality makes it happen, but everything good, everything that involves the glory of God, must suffer contradiction. Was it because of some predisposition against all new establishments or the fear of seeing a strange community come into a city which considered itself overburdened with those already existing there? Was it concern over losing the vested right of naming the teachers in those schools, as though the positions were a sort of benefice? Was it secret aversion and antipathy for strangers? I really cannot say. Nevertheless, the archbishop's proposal surprised the administrators, and he, in turn, was no less astonished at their surprise. He had foreseen some objections, but he had not expected to find these men so apprehensive over the proposal he had just made,

8. Colbert, the minister of finance in the early years of Louis XIV's reign, eventually fell into disfavor because he tried to curb the king's extravagance.

as though he wanted to introduce an enemy into the city. There was a certain amount of bafflement on both sides.

## The archbishop overcomes the objections

When they began to discuss the matter, the prelate tried to soften the prejudice in their minds by the solid arguments he advanced. He pointed out that the Brothers would not be a burden. The men whom he wished to invite into the city were not only good in themselves but also dedicated to the instruction and education of the poorest and most neglected children. His Excellency showed them the difference between, on the one hand, groups which are, so to speak, useless mouths in regard to the state, communities whose presence creates problems because they have to be supported by the localities where they exist, because they occupy extensive lands, because they possess vast wealth, and because of the scandalous and ill-regulated lives of some of their members and, on the other hand, institutes the immediate end of which is the public good, charity toward their neighbor, and especially the gratuitous service of the poorest and least fortunate members of society. He made them understand that debauchery, immorality, corruption of the lower classes, and disorders in the state that result therefrom all stem from a lack of instruction.

It was strange, he added, that one could find in a Christian country men who do not acknowledge God, who know nothing of Jesus Christ and his mysteries, who perhaps do not understand the difference between themselves and beasts, between vice and virtue, and who care nothing either for the science of salvation or for their civic duties, all because they have grown up without any religion or schooling, because no one has taken any interest in their education. The archbishop declared that it did not take prolonged reflection to realize how much the prince has to fear from subjects who do not fear God, how much the ordinary citizens suffer from men who are governed only by their bodily senses, and how little the state can hope for from people of whom the vast majority are blasphemous, intemperate, violent, and irreligious. Nobody can deny that such evils, the greatest affliction of the state as well as of the Church, have no other source than ignorance and bad education. He concluded that the state is no less interested than the Church in seeking a remedy for such problems and that the necessary and effective remedy was to establish Gratuitous Schools for those unable to pay for their instruction.

Such cogent arguments gave great weight to the pious cause for which the archbishop pleaded, and they should have made a deep

impression on the administrators, who are usually men of good sense and considerable merit. His pleas gradually brought them to where he wished to lead them and made them realize that as good citizens, as well as good Christians, they should be glad to have the Brothers and should promote, by love for the state as much as by the spirit of religion, an Institute so necessary for the public weal.

In addition, the Gratuitous Schools have endowments administered by the board, and the administrators have the right to name the teachers. The choice is theirs, but in conscience they are obliged to select the best ones available, the ones most capable of educating and instructing the children of the poor. Such a task is eminently suited to young clerics, but the funds available to pay them are not sufficient for their needs. The funds are likewise too modest to suffice for laymen who have some knowledge of the teaching profession. Each of the teachers has to live on what he is paid; if that is not enough, he has to make up the difference by outside undertakings, sometimes illegal ones. Thus, if a Charity School, supposed to be gratuitous, cannot provide the necessities of life to the teachers, they will try to supplement their income by other activities or by secretly demanding fees and other compensations, acts which do away with the gratuitous character of the school.

The result is that the purpose of such modest endowments is either not carried out at all or is poorly achieved. This reason alone, if carefully weighed, should settle the matter, but nowadays, he stated, people get up in arms as soon as you mention a community of men, and when it comes to concluding an agreement with them, people think they are binding themselves with chains. Yet only a community can guarantee to provide competent teachers for the schools on a permanent basis. Educated and trained with this in mind, the Brothers know far more about running schools than all the others who undertake this task. They take pride and pleasure in this work, because they engage in it as a vocation. Since nothing but charity calls them to it, they ask only to be provided with the strict necessities while they devote themselves to this good work.

If we consider the matter carefully, we can see that it is always an advantage to have the Brothers. In their hands, the students are well instructed and well brought up, because they are in charitable hands. When other teachers are sought to instruct youth, if we wish to have capable and devoted masters, we must be prepared to pay them double or triple what the Brothers receive. Since the Society of the Brothers provides very competent teachers for reading, writing, and arithmetic, since their method for learning is the shortest and best,

and since silence reigns in their classes, a child learns in a short time what he would take much longer to acquire with the writing masters, for not one of the latter, if he is at all capable, would consent to teach for less than double a Brother's stipend. Hence there is no doubt that hiring the Brothers is extremely advantageous.

To repeat, in the Brothers' schools, the children learn faster, are better brought up, are more carefully drilled in good manners and in their Christian duties, and are more adequately prepared for their first Communion. All these advantages, entirely gratis and so necessary for the children of the poor, cost the benefactors whose zeal provides these benefits for the youngsters only a small salary. Thus, common sense, the benefit accruing to the poor, and the board's own interests all spoke through the lips of Archbishop Colbert when he proposed to entrust the Charity Schools to the Brothers. But that was precisely the choice that would not be accepted by those men whose minds were mesmerized by phantoms. Only with the greatest difficulty did the archbishop make the board members understand the advantages presented by the plan he was suggesting. Eventually, there occurred a certain meeting of minds, and whether out of consideration for the prelate, deference to the president, or a realization of the cogency of the arguments, the board agreed to lodge the Brothers at the town hospice, so that they could teach the children there, and to entrust to them the endowed Charity Schools of the city, which Nyel had formerly directed.

## De La Salle goes to Rouen with the Brothers

Such was the news of which Archbishop Colbert, on his return to Paris, informed De La Salle. He urged him to send without delay a sufficient number of Brothers to teach the poor children under the control of the board and to take over the Charity Schools of the city. The prelate's secret motive in thus trying to hasten the Brothers' departure from Paris was, no doubt, his suspicion that delay might compromise the arrangement, thus giving the administrators time to go back on their decision. His suspicion was well founded; he foresaw what, in fact, did occur.

The desires of the holy Founder were accomplished at last. For over twelve years, he had been hoping to see the Brothers in charge of the schools that had been under Nyel's direction. Under the influence of a prophetic spirit, he had even declared that they would direct these schools one day. He viewed with joy the accomplishment of his prophecy. His foresight extended even farther. Knowing that he

needed a novitiate and realizing that it could not function normally in Paris, he thought of transferring it to Rouen. Except for the capital, he could think of no other city in the kingdom better suited for the purpose. Rouen was a great, wealthy city, not too far from Paris. There he hoped to find the backing that Paris refused him and to escape the harassment he had encountered. Moreover, the excellent communications between the two cities and the ease with which conveyances ply between them made it possible to make the trip cheaply. But while all the preparations were being made in Paris for the Brothers to leave, people in Rouen had changed their minds. Those who taught in the schools were interested in keeping their jobs, and they gave themselves no rest to avoid losing them. People had come back to their initial beliefs, and the administrators, forgetting in the absence of the archbishop and of the president a resolution that they had so reluctantly taken in their presence, would no longer hear of the Brothers' coming.

This change of heart did not disturb the prelate, who had half expected it. He told De La Salle not to worry, to send the Brothers on, and to go with them, promising that he himself would follow and would soon come back to Rouen to resolve the difficulties which he was sure to encounter on his return.

## Chapter III

*De La Salle brings the Brothers to Rouen; they settle there but only with great difficulty and under the harshest and most annoying conditions.*

The pious Founder set out for Rouen with the Brothers, rather after the manner of Saint Anthony on the road to Alexandria, accompanied by his monks in silence and prayer. This trip thus sanctified by recollection and constant prayer might have been mistaken for a devout pilgrimage performed in the most edifying manner. The Brothers observed such modesty that the fatigue of the journey, the variety of objects encountered, and the unexpected events that happened could not alter it. On the road, all the regular community exercises were performed with the same punctuality as at home.

Every day, the travelers heard Mass said for them by the one who acted as their visible angel, and they received Communion from him. This new Raphael, while leading them to Rouen, was really showing

them the path to eternity, and he let them behold only the road that leads to heaven. They were a spectacle to the passersby and left behind them everywhere the bountiful radiance of Jesus Christ. Their attitude and their behavior led people to conclude that they were indeed men of God. And since the sort of habit they wore had not yet been seen in those parts, people asked who these men were, since, unlike ordinary travelers, they trudged along without speaking and made use of their eyes only to guide their steps.

When they arrived at an inn, they became once again a subject of curiosity, because when they entered these public places where confusion and uproar so often reigned, they acted as though entering a church. They sought the most secluded rooms, where they set themselves to pray and to find in renewed interior prayer a rest from the fatigue of a journey made on foot. The most indifferent people were stung with curiosity about these strangers who were turning the inn into a monastery. In a word, such a trip was a real retreat. Indeed, that was what the Brothers who made it called it. It would seem that their every step, marked with the sign of virtue, should have led them to a city that favored them and welcomed them like men from heaven. No doubt it would have been thus, if in God's eternal counsels it had not been decreed that the best works must always suffer the bitterest opposition.

## The archbishop tries to temper the opposition to the Brothers

By changing his residence, De La Salle was only changing one cross for another. By coming to Rouen, he became a dweller in the city where his tomb would one day stand, a city which was preparing new trials for him. But since he was used to that, nothing of the kind startled him. On the contrary, he would have been very much surprised if the cross had not accompanied him there, as it had done everywhere else. The archbishop arrived shortly afterward. When the man of God went to ask for his blessing, the prelate told him to come to the next meeting of the board. Without losing any time, the archbishop called the meeting, after again consulting the president, and the two of them were present. They again heard the arguments of the opposition and sought to dissipate them but in vain. To the administrators, their own preconceived notions seemed to be unanswerable arguments.

Since he could not bring them back to the resolution they had previously taken, M. Colbert resolved to appeal to experience, and he asked them at least to give the Brothers a trial. This was the only

stratagem he could make use of to win his point after trying in vain by all means to present the matter under the most favorable light. Since their minds were all so closed that each board member tried to invoke reason in his favor, there was no way to discover where truth really lay, save in making an experiment.

The administrators thought they could see a host of objections to the admission of the Brothers. Letting them come to live in the town hospice would, they felt, cause its ruin or at least introduce disorder. M. Colbert insisted that on the contrary, they would bring with them order, good teaching, and good example. This deadlock could be resolved only by the test of experience. Give it a try, M. Colbert asked them. Do me the courtesy of finding out whether these inconveniences that you are so afraid of are real or imaginary. Only experience can demonstrate this; do not refuse to consult it and to abide by what it shows. This proposal was most plausible, and it was difficult for them to reject it without appearing unreasonable and admitting that they were moved only by ill humor. So the resolution was adopted, and thus all the objections apparently were dropped. They agreed to lodge the Brothers at the general hospice, which is also called the Bureau for Able-bodied Paupers, and to put them in charge of the children there.

At last, Monsieur Colbert could congratulate himself; he thought he had won all he wanted, but in fact he was far from having done so. He was dealing with crafty men who knew how to refuse while appearing to agree. The prelate would not have been so happy over the turn events had taken if he had realized that he was the dupe in the affair. In fact, the administrators had been cunning enough to set a trap in his way. When they opened one door to let the Brothers into the hospice, they were careful to unlock another by which they could infallibly turn them out again. Colbert hoped that the place would be transformed once the Brothers got there and that the instruction and good example they brought with them would expel ignorance and vice. He had a right to expect that, and if the Brothers had been given time and a free hand to act as they do elsewhere, he would indeed have enjoyed this satisfaction. But the administrators, who had agreed to his proposal only in appearance and out of pure condescension to him, since his wish was too reasonable to refuse, were firmly resolved to see to it that the experiment failed.

## The harsh conditions under which the Brothers are admitted

How did the administrators accomplish this? They limited the number of Brothers to four and would never agree to increase it. They made them undertake tasks foreign to their state and incompatible with their religious exercises, and they assigned to them an impossible work load. The Brothers were obliged to be present when the paupers got up and when they went to bed, in order to make them say their prayers; they had to instruct the children in the hospice as well as those in the four main schools in the city proper. They were forced to come back from the most distant sections of the city in order to take their meals, and they had to serve the paupers at table when they got back from school, even before they themselves had a chance to eat.

The administrators could easily foresee that the Brothers could not endure such stringent and inconvenient conditions for very long and that De La Salle would not delay in withdrawing them from such intolerable slavery. Under this regime, they would suffer spiritually and materially, in body and in soul, in their health and in their religious life. Those poor Brothers, overwhelmed by the weight of their burden and finding their virtue unequal to the demands made on it, would not take long to cry out to their father and beg him to get them out of a situation worse than that of the Israelites in Egypt. Such was the stratagem which the perspicacity of these gentlemen had laid out for the future and which their Christian uprightness had kept concealed from Messieurs Colbert and Couet in spite of their great sagacity.

I do not know whether or not the Spirit of God allowed De La Salle to discern the snare hidden beneath these conditions and to recognize that the real aim of the administrators was to get rid of the Brothers while pretending to accept them. Possibly he did see through the maneuver, but he resolved to say nothing. His modesty did not permit him to contradict the archbishop and to refuse to go along with the arrangement he had proposed as a means of conciliating his opponents. Indeed, the prelate's suggestion sounded so equitable that no one could turn it down without appearing to be uncooperative. It might also have been that De La Salle could see the good side in the unfair situation itself and was not sorry to discover in the harshness of the conditions imposed the motive that would justify his rejecting them later on. After all, it was only an experiment which did not bind him to anything. It merely allowed him to make a definitive contract later, in full knowledge of what was involved. Once the trial period was over, each party would be free to make its own decision. Because

the holy Founder saw that he really was not running any risk, he accepted the conditions as laid down.

The Brothers came to Rouen on 19 May 1705, and five of them were admitted to the Bureau a few days later. They were given food, lodging, and a small salary for other expenses. The school of Saint Maclou was opened in the same month of May, about three months after the one in Darnétal. Those of Saint Godard and Saint Eloi followed shortly thereafter, while that of Saint Vivien was the last to open.

The Brothers were assiduous in getting the paupers up and having them say their morning prayers. About eight o'clock, four of them went off to their classes. They came back at noon, served the paupers at table, and kept watch to make them observe order during the meal. Then they themselves ate, after which they went back to school. Returning to the hospice around six in the evening, they took the paupers to the refectory and ended the day with them, as they had begun it, by having them say their prayers. A fifth Brother stayed in the hospice and taught the poor children there. It would have been desirable that this sort of regulation would find as much strength as goodwill in those for whom it was prescribed, but since it was not tailored to accommodate human weakness, it could not go on for very long.

## The Brothers collapse under the harsh yoke imposed on them

The Brothers were exhausted by their tasks, and their morale began to falter under the multiple burdens they had to face. Their health suffered, as did their virtue, and it was at the expense of both that they persevered for two years in this state of servitude. De La Salle, to whom they complained, felt that he had to put up with the situation. He hoped that the administrators would in the end feel some pity for the Brothers and some remorse for exploiting them in this way. He hoped, but in vain, that they would either take the initiative in asking for more Brothers or at least welcome his offer to send some.

The administrators, who had admitted the Brothers to the Bureau only out of consideration for the archbishop, were not of a mind to keep them there out of deference to De La Salle. If courtesy did not permit them to dismiss the Brothers, their policy provided them with a handy means of getting rid of them by making it impossible for them to stay. Under the pretext of safeguarding the interests of the poor whom they were supposed to look after, they considered that they were right not to consent to an increase in the number of Brothers, since that would have meant spending more money. Such a plea,

which is always worthy of respect in the mouths of those who handle funds destined for the relief of the poor in a way which the public approves of, could not be faulted by the archbishop or by the president, who, as officials of the administration, were also bound to see that the funds of the Bureau were not wasted.

The trump card which remained in De La Salle's hand was that this dishonest pretext gave him the right to withdraw the Brothers, for it was obvious that the burden imposed on them was beyond their strength. The majority of them faltered under their yoke and fell ill. The two Brothers at Saint Maclou each had over 100 students to teach; so did the one at Saint Eloi. The fourth had over 150, and the fifth, at the hospice, had even more. They endured this overwork as well as they could, from May 1705 to June 1707. When one of them succumbed to illness or exhaustion, De La Salle sent a more vigorous Brother to replace him, but that could not go on indefinitely. For a long time, their good father bewailed the harsh conditions imposed on his sons. Unable to do anything to give them relief, he prayed, fasted, and did extraordinary penances to obtain from God a remedy for the situation or to secure God's light in order to know what he should do about it.

He had always wanted to have the schools that had been Nyel's, and he had thought that heaven intended him to have them. Now that they were his, he was reluctant to abandon them. While he hesitated and remained undecided in the midst of all such reflections, he received from his disciples a memorandum which helped him make up his mind. In their document, the Brothers brought out clearly how necessary it was to get them out of the hospice, where the spirit of their Institute ran as much risk as their health did. The advantage to the poor, as well as their own, required it. Nor was it difficult for them to prove their case. Since they were too few in proportion to the number of students, they could not do a good job. The classes were too big; the teachers were overworked, and many of the children were neglected; overwork affected not only the health of the teachers but discipline, order, silence, and instruction itself. In short, the purpose of the schools could not be attained; fatigue, the multiplicity of their tasks, and the long hours caused disorder in their interior life, so that they had no time for interior prayer and their other exercises of piety.

The conclusion was that they should leave the hospice, find a house in the city, and live there according to the spirit of the Institute. They added that if the administrators were willing to give them the income of the capital destined to provide for the teachers in the city's

Gratuitous Schools, they would be content with those modest appointments. It would then be possible to increase the number of Brothers in order to carry on the school's work properly; they feared less to suffer from poverty than to be wanting in regularity.

The worthy Superior, after weighing before God the reasons and other similar considerations, did not wish to decide anything without consulting the president, who was taking more and more interest in his work. That eminent magistrate could only approve of the arguments advanced in the memorandum; consequently, he advised the servant of God to expand these points in a petition which he himself would then present to the administrators of the Bureau and which he promised to recommend. That was done.

De Pontcarré ran no risk in the matter, for the petition did not need his backing in order to be accepted. He saw that the Brothers did not have to ask for any special permission to leave and that the administrators would be happier to see them leave the hospice than they had been when they came. As far as I can ascertain, M. Colbert was not involved at that point. I do not know why not. He was either away or did not wish to become involved in having the Brothers leave a place where he had so much wanted them to be. The fact is that he always honored De La Salle and favored him and his disciples, and he never lost his early zeal for Christian and Gratuitous Schools. He did not disdain to visit them himself, and he witnessed with great pleasure the new methods that the Brothers were using to teach with a minimum of words.

## De La Salle withdraws the Brothers from the hospice

De La Salle was graciously received at the meeting of the administrators, once the purpose of his visit was understood. The members congratulated themselves on having at last secured what they wanted and on having excluded by their clever maneuver those whom they had welcomed out of human respect. They even had the satisfaction of seeing the very people who had urged them to admit the Brothers now asking that they be allowed to leave. Their contentment was complete when they found in the petition a way of turning the departure of the Brothers to the advantage of the Bureau by requiring that they provide the city schools with the same services as before but at an even lower price.

The petition included two articles. In the first, after the reasons were explained, the administrators were requested to consent to the departure of the Brothers. In the second, the Brothers offered to teach

in the Gratuitous Schools of the city on the basis of existing endowments and to be satisfied with the paltry revenue that these provided. The first article presented no problem; it was accepted as soon as it was read. The discussion on the second article gave these gentlemen the opportunity to require of the Brothers a sort of indemnification for the time they had lived at the hospice and to permit them to conduct the four city schools under an onerous title, as though they should have been happy to pay for the privilege of serving the poor.

During the time the Brothers had lived at the Bureau, the authorities had not wished to restrict their work but had scrupulously limited their number to five and had never agreed to increase the number. The Brothers were crushed under the burden of their duties; overwork exhausted some and caused others to fall ill. But no matter. The hospice was still well served, because the little band of Brothers was regularly rejuvenated by new members, in better health, who came in their turn to help bear this exaggerated work load. When the Brothers left, their work would be diminished by half, and some relief would be given to them. The first condition was, however, that their number should be doubled: ten Brothers were asked for to run the schools at Saint Maclou, Saint Vivien, Saint Godard, and Saint Eloi. The second condition required of De La Salle was that he be satisfied with half the revenue from the foundation, namely, 600 livres a year. If he agreed to these conditions, they would consent to let him run the schools in question.

## To remain, the Brothers have to work for almost nothing

De La Salle agreed to everything, even though he was being asked for a great deal and was offered little or nothing in return. To understand to what lengths he carried his disinterestedness on this occasion, we must bear in mind that each Brother ordinarily is supposed to receive a salary of 100 écus in addition to furnished lodgings. Moreover, where there are several of them teaching in a given locality, they need a serving Brother and a Brother Director who governs the Brothers and is always ready to replace any of them who may be incapacitated.

Thus, although the Founder was asked to provide ten Brothers to teach in the schools, the true number was twelve. If they had each been paid 100 écus, that would have amounted to 3,600 livres a year; if they had been paid the absolute minimum salary of 250 livres, that would still have meant 1,000 écus, in addition to the residence furnished rent free. But there, for the twelve Brothers, only 600 livres were to be paid, and of that sum, over half, namely 310 livres, went

for the rent of the house they occupied. Clearly, to teach in the Gratuitous Schools in Rouen, they were getting only one-tenth of the salary they are paid elsewhere. I am right, therefore, in saying that they were being asked for much and given little in return. The fact is that the administrators were very glad to exploit the Brothers but did not see fit to offer them a commensurate return for their sacrifice. Their services were appraised at the lowest possible figure, and they had to accept it or leave.

De La Salle accepted, hoping that Divine Providence would make it possible for him to find in the charity of private citizens what the board refused to give him. He leased a house and occupied it on 2 August 1707 along with the Brothers who, like him, had to suffer all the rigors of poverty. But they were delighted, because they finally found themselves free to take up again their exercises of piety and to follow their Rule. They felt happy in becoming even poorer, provided they could become more regular.

The terms of that agreement are still in effect twenty-five years later. Time has brought no modifications in it, except that the number of students has increased, thus adding to the Brothers' work. Once they have paid their rent, the twelve Brothers have only about 100 écus left to live on and to defray their expenses. How can they possibly do it? How have they done it for the past twenty-five years with a salary of 100 écus for twelve men? That is certainly one of those mysteries which nobody can believe, unless he knows that there is a Divine Providence. Another mystery is why people permit the Brothers to wear themselves out in their service of the poor without taking any interest in trying to help them, as though their work does not concern the public, as though the Brothers do not have the right that the Gospel gives to all workers of reaping where they sow and of living by their ministry. It is as though they alone have to labor at their own expense in the Father's field.

## Ill treatment as a reward for their work with no pay

They have been abandoned to their fate; the only rewards they have received so far for their services in Rouen are continual scorn and frequent insults. In no city in France have they had to endure such ill treatment. In the beginning, they could hardly appear in public without meeting with some kind of abuse. People seemed to take pleasure in dishonoring them, day after day, by hurling new sorts of insults at them. Mud, stones, and blows were not spared them. The presence of De La Salle with them could not shield them from all that.

Disregarding his priestly character, lacking respect for the air of sanctity which surrounded his brow, people threw stones at the Brothers in the streets; they threw them at him as well and distributed affronts evenly between the father and his sons. They purposely stopped the Brothers, pushed them into the ditch, and tried to make them fall into the mud. They spat on them and hit them as they passed by. The rabble massed together to laugh at them when they approached and covered them with outrages, as if they were declared enemies.

Insolence in their regard was carried even farther, as shrewish women went so far as to slap them on the face in public for the mean satisfaction of trying their patience or of provoking some response. Every day, some new joke about them regaled the public. Even in their schools, which could be called the theater of their charity, they were not sheltered from affronts. More than once, people invaded the classes to maltreat them. Yet, in Rouen, all this was tolerated. The upper classes were the first to laugh over it and to enjoy the stories about the different misfortunes that had happened to the Brothers and about the latest tricks played on them, instead of chastising the authors of these vexations and by severe penalties putting an end to these disorders.

"Ah, how happy you are, my dear Brothers, if you can understand all this, and how I should envy you, if I had the grace to endure the like," said a priest one day to two Brothers whom he saw passing by amidst the hoots of the rabble. "You are treated with ignominy, but if these insults are tolerable to you and if you can be happy under them, you are not to be pitied. What is most precious and glorious is that in which you share, as Saint Peter says."

We must admit, however, that the city of Rouen has finally begun to change its attitude toward the Brothers. Perhaps people have grown tired of testing their virtue, or perhaps they merely grew accustomed to seeing them. Nowadays, they are at least tolerated and left in peace. Men who were so hated and so despised for the sake of justice and who can say, like their Divine Master, that they were hated without cause, had nothing to hope for from the purses of the charitable in order to eke out their living expenses. They were remembered only when people wished that they were out of the city. The work they did drew as little attention as their persons, and when anyone mentioned their extreme poverty, someone else was sure to reply coldly that it was a great mistake on De La Salle's part to have brought them to a place where he could not provide for their subsistence.

The cruelest indigence was their lot, and it would be difficult to list all that they have had to suffer from it in the past thirty years.

Their work, unpaid and unrequited, has up to now brought them only suffering and scorn. Hunger, thirst, heat, cold, destitution, and the persecutions which are the lot of apostolic men have, so far, been their sole recompense. To this day, they have fought the good fight at their own expense. They have cultivated the Lord's vineyard as well as they could, without sharing in the fruits thereof. In a word, they have spent themselves in the service of the Church without hope of material reward. For thirty years, the Brothers have lived in Rouen, lacking everything: clothes, furniture, often food, and the other necessities of life. Yet never have they been unfaithful to their duty; never have they neglected their proper tasks. Exposed to hunger and cold during 1709 and 1710, they endured, with the exception of death itself, all that famine and a long and bitter winter could inflict upon them.

The Brothers' pitiful condition was not unknown, but nobody showed any compassion for them, and they received nothing but disdainful refusals from those who should have relieved their penury and taken an interest in their survival. It is true that from time to time, God did inspire some worthy persons to extend their charity even to these Brothers, but it would seem that in doing so, God intended to furnish them only with what was absolutely necessary for life and to keep them from dying of cold and hunger, not wishing to spare them the rigors of the one or the other. The alms that came to them were so rare and so insignificant that they considered as extraordinary and even miraculous a gift of twenty-two livres that someone made to them during those calamitous times. It was received from some unknown benefactor, along with a note saying: *Do not concern yourselves with the source of this gift. Put your confidence in God. Take care to serve him faithfully, and he will provide for you.* The advice was excellent; the Brothers would have been happy to receive it more often, accompanied by a similar offering.

## Chapter IV

*De La Salle transfers his novitiate to Saint Yon, near Rouen.*

The hope for the harvest is in the seed; the duration of an edifice depends on its foundation, and the holiness of an institute results from a good novitiate. If land that has been badly sown produces nothing except briers and thorns and if a house without a solid foundation is threatened with collapse, we must conclude that if a good novitiate is

wanting, a community finds in its beginning the source of its destruction. It is a spiritual edifice, lacking a solid foundation, which will be overthrown by its own members. There is no hope for holiness where the seed of virtue has not been carefully sown and has not sprung up in souls. When new subjects are professed in an institute, their commitment will not promote the glory of God or the good of religion unless they are trained in virtue. Even if they become as numerous as the stars in the heavens, the Church would reap no advantage from them, and to them we might apply the words of the Prophet: *You have multiplied the people, O Lord, but you have not increased the joy.*

De La Salle firmly held to these truths. Consequently, he had nothing more at heart than to make saints out of all those who aspired to become his disciples. He himself would have labored to destroy what he had erected, had he not found a way to contribute to their sanctification. What pleased him was not the number of Brothers but the number of saints in his Institute. From the beginning, when he had been inspired to gather his followers together, his only thought had been to form them to eminent piety, to make of them new men. They did indeed become such or else soon left his house, and when he saw the number of candidates increase, he sought a place of retirement where he could sanctify them at leisure through the exercises of a fervent novitiate.

The training of the novices was always the primary object of his zeal. He never allowed anyone else to replace him in this task, except when it was impossible for him to fulfill it in person. It was his especially beloved mission, for in it his own interest was combined with that of the Institute. By that I mean that he found opportunities for furthering his own perfection while promoting that of the Brothers. He never had anything more at heart than to direct this academy of virtue, convinced as he was that the level of sanctity in his Institute would be measured by that achieved in the novitiate. Considering it the heart of his budding Society, he paid the greatest attention to it, just as God, the Author of nature, begins the formation of the human body by the heart and, as the Author of grace, initiates our sanctification by changing us interiorly.

In how many ways did the devil not seek to disturb the servant of God in the direction of his novitiate! When De La Salle himself was driven hither and thither, his novitiate felt all the repercussions of the persecutions that hell stirred up in view of suffocating his Institute in its cradle. After transferring the novitiate from one place to another, when he himself was forced to seek refuge here and there, the holy man did not know where he could settle down permanently with it.

In addition, the mobile and uncertain conditions in which the Founder had been trying to maintain the novitiate as well as he could had greatly disrupted it, and it was time to find a suitable location where he could re-establish it. De La Salle had been reluctant to move it out of Paris, the center of the kingdom, where there certainly existed the best prospects for attracting more candidates and providing them with better training. But in the end, he had to leave and to establish his novitiate somewhere else.

Rouen attracted De La Salle's attention because of its proximity to the capital and the easy communications between the two cities. He had been considering this move when Divine Providence offered him an opportunity of executing it by allowing the Brothers to establish themselves at Darnétal and at the Bureau in Rouen. The main objective he had in mind in accepting these schools, under conditions which obliged him to support them mostly at his own expense, was that this would help him find a spot adapted for the training of the novices. He was distressed on seeing his little flock always on the move, now in one house, now in another, without being able to settle down permanently anywhere. He also observed with regret the loss of fervor suffered by his Community as a result of all this agitation. So he ardently begged God to give him some place of repose where he might serve him and teach others to serve him in tranquillity. To obtain that grace, he had, as was his wont, recourse to prayer, vigils, and extraordinary penances.

## De La Salle obtains permission to move the novitiate

Since he was a man with a strong sense of hierarchy and considered his superiors as oracles who pointed out to him the will of God, De La Salle did not wish to make a decision without first writing to M. Colbert to sound him out on the matter. He informed him of the projected move of his novitiate from Paris to Rouen and asked him to be good enough to consent to it, if he thought it proper. The answer was favorable. Abbé Couet, who wrote the reply after having had the archbishop approve the project, mentioned to him how eager His Excellency was to see new schools of the Brothers opened in different places and to have them all over the diocese. The servant of God considered this approval as a sign of the divine will, and he lost no time in trying to find a suitable house.

After looking a long time for one within the city, he finally found what he wanted at the farther end of the Faubourg Saint Sever; he preferred this property to one which had been offered him in another

suburb. The residence, called Saint Yon, is very ancient. Its walls enclose some eighteen acres of land. In bygone times, it had been called the Manor of Haute-Ville, and in the course of the last two centuries, it had passed from one aristocratic family to another, as appears from the various acts of sale in the possession of the Brothers. One of these owners, Monsieur de Saint Yon, who lived there until 1615, gave his name to the property. His piety led him to construct a small chapel, which he dedicated to his patron, a disciple of Saint Denis and a martyr. Such is the origin of the name given to the property.

In 1670, a certain Madame de Bois-Dauphin had bought it and gave the use of it to the sisters of her first husband, nuns of the Sisters of Souvrai, one of whom was the abbess of the famous monastery of Saint Amand in Rouen. As the original chapel was too small, Madame de Bois-Dauphin enlarged it by half to make it more convenient for the Sisters. She would have wished to give the property to the abbey, but the Sisters of Souvrai would not accept it.

After the death of the abbess, Madame de Barentin, a niece of Madame de Bois-Dauphin, became abbess and received the use of the domain of Saint Yon. Finally, when Madame de Barentin died, the property was inherited by Madame Louvois, the daughter of Madame de Bois-Dauphin and her first husband, De Souvré.

## De La Salle rents Saint Yon and comes there with his novices

The property was put up for lease at the time De La Salle came to Rouen to establish the Christian and Gratuitous Schools. He went to look it over and liked what he saw. After speaking to Monsieur Colbert, he hastened back to Paris to ask Madame de Louvois to rent it to him. Fortunately, she was well disposed toward De La Salle, because she had heard from her brother-in-law, Archbishop Le Tellier of Reims, and from her son, Abbé de Louvois, who had lived a long time with his uncle, all the favorable things that can be said about a great servant of God. Happy at being able to do a favor for a man considered a saint by her family and also by her late brother-in-law, the former archbishop of Reims—who was not one to bestow such a title lightly —she agreed to let him have the property for 400 livres a year, a very reasonable rate, and signed a lease for six years.

De La Salle concluded the transaction so quickly and secretly that his enemies, who might have tried to interfere and to make the plan fall through, were not even aware of what was going on. With the same promptness, he sent off to Rouen all the furniture he had stored in Paris, in the Faubourg Saint Antoine, to be used to equip the new

house. In this way, the novitiate was already established at the outskirts of Rouen before it was known that it had left Paris. The Sisters of Saint Amand, on learning who was taking over their house at Saint Yon and what he intended to do with it, generously donated the tapestries and paintings that adorned the chapel and a number of articles of furniture. It was toward the end of August 1705 that De La Salle and his followers took up residence in that house which God intended for them and which later did become their property.

When De La Salle arrived in Rouen from Paris, M. Colbert granted him the most ample faculties, with no time limit attached, hoping to make use of a man of such uncommon merit for the benefit of his diocese and to attach him to it. The servant of God exercised these faculties with great restraint. He made it a point to restrict his zeal to his own house and not to share with strangers the time that God afforded him to promote the sanctification of his sons and the perfection of his Institute. If sometimes he went abroad, it was only on rare occasions for some extraordinary gathering where necessity or charity made it a duty for him to be of service to others and to contribute to their salvation. He considered himself at Saint Yon like a man who had been tossed about by a hundred different tempests and had escaped as many shipwrecks, one who finally finds himself safe in port. He thought only of repairing the losses he had sustained and of putting to good use for the well-being of his soul and the sanctification of his sons the peace and tranquillity he had finally secured. No place on earth could have been more to the Founder's liking or suited him better. Although located at the gates of one of the largest and wealthiest cities in the kingdom, the site is solitary and secluded. Offering plenty of fresh air and an agreeable panorama, it contains a series of large gardens. The pleasant solitude favored his dominant inclination for a life of retirement and union with God and promised him full liberty to give himself to prayer and to live, although so near Rouen, like a hermit in the desert.

This property which was so much to the liking of the holy Founder and so well suited for his Institute was equally attractive to De Pontcarré, who used to come out and walk there. That was where the senior magistrate came to rest from the contention of the bar and the fatigues of his office. He enjoyed walking alone in that peaceful spot, and when he came there, the Brothers shut the gates to everyone else, so as to leave him alone with his thoughts and with God.

Thenceforth De La Salle considered Saint Yon as the place of his repose. Once he had established himself there, he took all imaginable precautions to prevent relaxation from penetrating his Community and

closed all possible avenues by which it could infiltrate this new Eden. His first care was to repeople his novitiate and bring it back to its initial fervor. That was not accomplished without some difficulty, especially at the outset, for the various ups and downs that the novitiate had experienced for some years past had discouraged many candidates and had made them disinclined to follow a vocation that met with so much opposition. With time, however, the regular life led in the novitiate attracted a good number of postulants. The Founder put Brother Barthélemy, a prudent and gentle man, in charge of them, but he did not entirely stop looking after them himself. The training of the novices was always his main concern; he shared it with others only when he was obliged to give his attention to other important duties.

## The Brothers are called to Saint Yon to renew their fervor

While thus rebuilding his novitiate, the Founder undertook to revive the spirit of the Institute in his entire Community and to take advantage of solitude to bring his disciples back to their first grace and fervor. He feared that the troubles, uncertainties, and long-continued agitation that his Community had undergone in Paris might have brought about a weakening of piety, even in the houses situated in the provinces. To counter this trend or rather to forestall it, he called to Saint Yon during the vacation period as many as possible of the Brothers who lived in various places and had them make an eight-day retreat with him. He was always at their head, encouraging all by his presence and confirming by his example of consummate virtue the lessons he imparted to them on this subject. Each morning, he gave them a conference, and one of the priests who lived there gave another in the evening, for the three or four priests who had joined him when he lived in the parish of Saint Roch in Paris had followed him to Saint Yon and lived there.

In this way, the Father gathered his children around him in solitude and breathed new life into them, rekindled their zeal, and inspired them with a new desire for perfection. He stirred up in them once more the spirit of dependence, of mortification, of penance, of poverty, and of love for their vocation. He sought to inspire them to practice all the virtues proper to their state. Because the Brothers heard him recommend nothing but what they saw him practice, they were gently constrained to imitate him. Wherever they met him and at all times, they saw in him a man deeply recollected, united with God, severe toward himself, thirsting for humiliations, with no attraction for anything except interior prayer and suffering.

De La Salle was a punctual observer of the Rule, and when the Brothers confided to him the fear they felt that everything that was being observed among them might not last and in all likelihood would change after his death, he replied that God would ask him an account not of the future but of the present and that he was resolved to be faithful to the end. Convinced of all this, De La Salle was far from relaxing any of his penitential practices. A retreat made under such propitious circumstances and under such an accomplished master gave the whole Community a new impetus toward the interior life and repaired the damage caused by the recent upheavals and the continual persecutions. The Brothers, filled with the joy and consolation given by the Holy Spirit, went home with new enthusiasm. On leaving Saint Yon, they felt that they were only now beginning truly to enter God's service.

## The good reputation of the schools at Saint Yon

The house at Saint Yon, sanctified by the presence of the servant of God, soon acquired a great reputation everywhere and provided a solution to the problem faced by parents who had failed to give their children a proper education. At first, the holy Founder was asked to take in as boarders a number of young people from the city and the surrounding area to instruct them and train them in piety. This request, so conformable to his aims, was agreeable to him. The Christian instruction and education of youth being the principal object of his zeal and the end of his Institute, he was glad to welcome into his house all the children that people wanted to send him, so that they might be brought up in innocence and in the knowledge of their religion. He placed them under the guidance of one of the most capable Brothers, wrote a regulation befitting their age and social standing, and set them up in a sort of junior novitiate where all the actions of the day and the pious exercises were performed at fixed times.

The results obtained in this sort of training school did not take long to become known. When parents came to see their children, they no longer recognized them. They were indeed changed. Most of them displayed such modesty, piety, and docility that their own mothers and fathers could scarcely believe their eyes. They spoke about the school, and other parents hastened to entrust their children to such a remarkable institution. In this way and within a short time, the number of boarders grew beyond all expectations. Rouen was no longer the only city that furnished pupils to Saint Yon; they came from everywhere, even from Paris.

When the public learned of the success of the Brothers in teaching these youngsters, people advised families struggling with stubborn, recalcitrant, depraved, and unmanageable children that they could find for them at Saint Yon a place of retirement and correction; they assured them that their youngsters would be very different on leaving from what they had been on entering. Many parents resolved to follow this advice and entrusted to those teachers, more skillful than themselves, the reform of their children. Before long, the house was filled.

The success met with in this re-education of unmanageable children who had been despaired of led to the opening at Saint Yon of still another special section for people much more difficult to handle. Confirmed criminals were consigned there, some by decrees of parliament, others by court orders, and several by the authority of their parents. The Brothers had the consolation of seeing several of those men change to a better life and do real penance in a place where they had been locked up as malefactors. It is hardly believable how many really perverse men have been converted in that house. Many rebellious and unmanageable children there lost their belligerence and impiety, and many others began to walk once more in the path of salvation and duty. Several desired to remain there the rest of their lives. A few even asked to receive the Brothers' habit and became members of the Institute. Others would not leave, except to enter a monastery. The greater number, once they had gone back home, showed by the kind of life they thenceforth led that they had left Saint Yon very different from what they had been on entering it. In short, the majority of those brought up there have been a credit to the house and give the example of an upright life as a proof of the fine education they received there.

## Three types of boarders at Saint Yon

All these good results which are attributable to De La Salle and were set in motion by him still continue today. Although since the death of the holy Founder, the buildings at Saint Yon have been enlarged by two-thirds, the place is still too small to house all the boarders who would like to enroll there. There are three groups of boarders. The first is composed of the regular boarding students who come to Saint Yon for a truly Christian education. They are in the care of a Brother who keeps an eye on them all the time and who teaches them reading, writing, and arithmetic. Those who so desire and who have the ability for it learn drawing, geometry, and architecture.

The second group is made up of wild and unmanageable young men who are sent there to be reformed and corrected. These are watched over even more closely. They are constantly supervised by a Brother who never leaves them and who never gives them a chance to draw aside or to escape from his vigilance. Their education, however, is not different from that of the first group. They all follow the same exercises of piety; the same exhortations and catechism lessons are addressed to them. They are taught how to receive the sacraments properly. Those who have not made their first Communion are prepared to do so, and if they have already received it, they are taught to make amends for their past life by a good general Confession. In a word, they live as though they were in a seminary or in a fervent religious community, following a series of exercises of piety or instruction suitable to their age and social condition. They take their meals in the same refectory as the Brothers and witness their various practices of piety. That is ordinarily what touches them the most and inspires them with the desire to return to God.

The third group of inmates at Saint Yon is made up of those who are forcibly detained there, whether by *lettres de petit cachet*[9] or by a court sentence. They are confined to a cell and carefully guarded. There, left to themselves, they have plenty of time to reflect, something they had rarely done before, and to go over their past life in the bitterness of their heart. Thus confined within four walls, they learn in solitude what the world had kept hidden from their eyes, and they begin to remember the truths they have forgotten or wanted to forget. Forced to recall that there is a hereafter and that their prison is merely a foretaste of hell, they learn, little by little, to regret the sins which caused them to be condemned, to fear God, and to come back to him.

No doubt when they are first brought in, they often defile the cell which will be their prison by the curses and blasphemies suggested by rage and spite. Often enough, however, they find there a grace which touches them and which, by changing their hearts, causes tears of compunction to succeed the transports of frenzy and despair. When they seem truly contrite, the door of their cell is opened, and they are allowed to follow the exercises of piety performed in the house. It is then that charity completes in them the task of their conversion which fear of hell had begun. Examples of such conversions

9. These were sealed orders, signed by the king, for the arrest of wayward people of consequence, often nobles or clergy, who had to be removed from public view for a time.

are not rare at Saint Yon, and we could draw up a long list of names of those who found God there after they had lost him.

De La Salle organized the house of Saint Yon into three communities. One was made up of the three divisions of the boarders of which we have just spoken; another included the novices, and the third contained the serving Brothers and others employed in the work of the Institute. All of these had some exercises in common and others that were special to each group. They were carried out so faithfully that in spite of the variety of occupations and the great number of those who lived in the place, no trace of confusion or disorder appeared. The regularity that reigned was so perfect that no one could see a boarder, a Brother, or a novice out of place, nor would one group mingle with another, still less indulge in aimless moving about while neglecting its proper duties. The most edifying thing was that everything went on in this house in such deep silence that outsiders, on entering, sometimes would not realize that it was inhabited. Yet, as a rule, over one hundred persons differing in age, temperament, character, state of life, and position lived there and do so today, under one roof but separated from one another. They had nothing to do with each other, except insofar as the rules prescribed or obedience permitted. Good example was constant and always impressed everyone. We cannot sufficiently admire a house where the number and the different categories of dwellers bring about neither trouble nor disturbance, where the novices do not know those with whom they live, and where the Brothers themselves have no contacts except with their Superior.

Very likely, nothing won for the Brothers the goodwill and the protection of M. de Pontcarré so much as the spirit of recollection and retirement that he witnessed at Saint Yon when he went there to enjoy a little respite from the overwhelming burdens of business. He often spoke of this spirit to Monsieur Colbert, who congratulated himself on having in his diocese such a useful and edifying Community. The archbishop, delighted at being able to number among his flock the patriarch of such a virtuous family, showed himself extremely favorable to De La Salle and begged him to make use for the good of the diocese of the extensive faculties he had given him. The desire of the man of God was, instead, not to appear abroad and make a spectacle of himself. The Founder stayed in his novitiate as much as he could, and only in urgent cases did he feel himself authorized to leave it.

# CHAPTER V

*New persecutions are launched in Paris against De La Salle and his Institute.*

Much as the holy priest appreciated the solitude of Saint Yon, he left it as soon as God's will called him elsewhere. He had not been enjoying it for very long, when the same persecution that had driven him from Paris forced him to go back there. True, hidden as he was from the eyes of his enemies, he was not personally exposed to their thrusts, but as a father, he suffered from the attacks made against his disciples and his work. He had thought that by fleeing from his opponents, he would cause their fury to abate and that they would be ashamed to pursue a man who abandoned the battlefield to them. He was mistaken. Hell, which had inspired them, was more aroused against his Institute than against him personally. Unable to make peace with either the one or the other, Satan launched against the schools of Saint Sulpice the same onslaught and harassments which had ruined those of the Faubourg Saint Antoine, hoping to cause them to fail in the same way.

De La Salle learned of these new attacks on the schools at the time in his life when he felt most at peace. He enjoyed the profound tranquillity of Saint Yon. At last, he had found an oasis of rest after so many and such bitter struggles. He was like a man who has come home after a long voyage, back in port after having been exposed for so long to the fury of the waves. Yet now he had to leave his peaceful abode and go back to Paris to face new tempests, in order to serve his Brothers as their pilot and to take in hand once more the rudder of the bark so persistently agitated and threatened with shipwreck.

He was advised that the Christian Schools in the parish of Saint Sulpice risked undergoing the same fate as the school in the Faubourg Saint Antoine, since the writing masters apparently enjoyed complete liberty to cause the same disruption. They came to interfere with the Brothers who were exercising their ministry and created great agitation about keeping certain pupils away. At the same time, De La Salle was informed that those on whose protection he had a right to rely were closing their eyes and affecting ignorance about the vexations carried out against the Brothers. Like people completely indifferent to the outcome, they allowed the harassing tactics to develop, and they seemed not to care which side would emerge victorious.

All this De La Salle had foreseen. After the destruction of the school in the Faubourg Saint Antoine, he had understood that the

writing masters, emboldened by their success, would next move against the Saint Sulpice schools and would try to close them also. It was as a diversionary move that he had opened the school in the parish of Saint Roch. Hoping to make them forget their intentions, he had preferred to disappear and had taken refuge in Rouen with the few remaining novices. But in vain did he expect to mollify by his departure those men whose jealousy and self-interest led them to attack his Institute rather than him personally. After having, as it were, driven De La Salle out of Paris, they wanted to expel his Brothers from the city and wipe out the very name of the Christian and Gratuitous Schools.

In reality, what pained the holy Founder most was not to see his Institute so furiously persecuted. He knew that men would strive in vain to overthrow his work, if God protected it. He recalled that the first preachers of the Gospel were never more ardent in announcing the Good News than when they were in prison and loaded with chains. It was with such reflections that he comforted his disciples and induced them to be patient. He often quoted the famous words of Gamaliel: If this undertaking is from God, who can destroy it? If my work does not come from God, I would consent to its ruin. I would join our enemies in destroying it if I thought that it did not have God for its author or that he did not will its progress. But if he declares himself its defender, let us fear nothing. He is the Almighty. No arm can uproot what he has planted; no hand can snatch away what he holds in his. He upholds the entire universe and keeps it in motion. Nothing happens that he does not see, does not allow. Those whom he covers with his maledictions remain accursed, and in vain do men seek to curse those whom he blesses. So let us abandon ourselves to his guidance. If he takes our work in hand, he will, to further its progress, make use of the very ones who are so determined to destroy it. Indeed, it is from the depths of our afflictions that we should draw the reasons for our joy. If contradiction is proof that an enterprise comes from God, let us be happy; our Institute is indeed his creation. The cross which follows it everywhere gives us assurance of this.

This language of faith reanimated his disciples, and when he saw that they accepted it, his joy was complete. But impressions sometimes fade away, and then it was their discouragement and timidity in the face of opposition, rather than the opposition itself, which he feared. At the time of which we speak, he knew that they were frightened over the persecution which was threatening. He felt that he needed to reassure them by his presence and to go to share with them the trials which he could not ward off from them.

When De La Salle reached Paris, he found his sons a prey to new warnings. Seeing that the devastation caused in the school in the Faubourg Saint Antoine had not closed those in the Faubourg Saint Germain and had not brought about any changes in their manner of operating, the writing masters began their vexations again with a vengeance. First, in the absence of De La Salle, they tried to intimidate the Brothers by repeated threats of summonses, lawsuits, and legal embarrassments. They had intimidated them, indeed, because these mere words—lawsuits, sentences, and procedures—frightened those peaceful Brothers who had learned from Saint Paul that *God's servants should not be parties to litigation.* In vain had the virtuous Brothers tried to pacify their rivals by gentle and humble replies, by prayers and remonstrances. As they had not succeeded, they made up their minds to keep quiet, but by appearing to be deaf and dumb, they only irritated all the more those adversaries whom everything exasperated and who wanted only one thing: open warfare, but warfare on uneven terms, a conflict in which they wished to appear wearing all the colors of righteousness.

As we mentioned previously, the writing masters, not having succeeded in destroying the Gratuitous Schools as they had several times attempted to do, had to be content with demanding that the Brothers should be enjoined from accepting in their classes any students not publicly listed as paupers. That seemed reasonable enough on the surface. People thought that in founding the Christian Schools, De La Salle had in view the instruction of the children of the poor exclusively, since the children of the affluent could afford to pay for their education. But that notion, apparently so equitable, was at bottom pernicious, because it provided those with selfish motives a specious pretext to interfere constantly and to cause trouble in the Gratuitous Schools, quarreling incessantly with the Brothers over the choice of those children whom they would accept in their classes.

De La Salle had discerned the trap that they were setting for him in advancing a principle apparently so reasonable. He had never agreed to it, and rightly so, for if he had, he would have set limits to his charity. He would, under the appearance of a compromise measure, have agreed to the ruin of the Christian Schools, furnished his rivals with an inexhaustible source of dispute, and bequeathed to his disciples an eternal series of lawsuits. Every day, the guild of writing masters or their inspectors would have maintained that such and such a child was rich, even though the Brothers declared him poor. The argument settled today over one would have arisen again tomorrow over another, and how could such a dispute ever be adjudicated?

Who had a right to inventory the possessions of a child's parents to prove whether they were in poverty or in easy circumstances?

Even if De La Salle had not been aware of the bad faith of his adversaries, even if he could have believed that they had not stirred up this new topic of dispute for the sole purpose of ruining the Christian Schools, how could he have subjected himself to such intolerable conditions? Was it up to him to make such distinctions of persons in admitting children to his schools? Was it his business to decide on the poverty or wealth of their parents? Could he have made such a decision in an intelligent manner? If he had taken such a responsibility upon himself, what would people have said of him? Are not all children within their rights when they request gratuitous instruction in schools open to the public? If the teachers who teach *gratis* have more ability than those who sell their efforts, must the child who seems wealthy and who often enough is not so at all choose an ignorant teacher, just because his parents are not on the list of paupers duly recognized by the state?

These arguments and the others which we have already set down in various places show that De La Salle would have granted the writing masters the power to destroy his Institute if he had agreed to their demands. That became evident in the present situation. The writing masters would constantly come to disturb the Christian Schools, calling the Brothers to task for admitting children who could pay. Under the pretext of inquiring into such cases, they called in the law, found fault with this or that, made everybody lose a great deal of time, prevented the students from entering, or forced out others who were present. That was a good way to cause the classes of the Brothers to remain deserted, which was precisely what they wanted. If they had been allowed to continue in that way, the Christian Schools would not have lasted much longer.

Meanwhile, those who had a right to oppose such proceedings and could have easily stopped them did nothing. They seemed asleep and pretended to be unaware of the disruption which, day after day, was growing worse under their eyes. The remedy would have been easy to apply. If the parish priest of Saint Sulpice had put in an appearance, he could have quelled the storm. An agreement had been concluded between the parish priests of Paris and the guild of writing masters by which the latter were forbidden to set foot in the Charity Schools without the permission of the parish priest. Their flagrant violation of the provision clearly put the writing masters in the wrong; it would have been easy to shut the door in their faces and to keep them out when they came only to cause trouble and disorder.

De La Salle's enemies, who had succeeded in poisoning De La Chétardie's mind against him and in convincing the parish priest to side with them, either did not allow the pastor to be informed of the trouble or prevented him from doing anything about it. They even succeeded in getting him to close the school he had established a few years previously, on rue Les Fossez de M. le Prince, as a gesture of appeasement offered to the writing masters. Perhaps De La Chétardie had hoped that by suppressing this school, he would place the others beyond the reach of their attacks. What the enemies of the servant of God wanted was to oblige the Brothers to retire completely from the parish schools and to follow De La Salle himself into self-imposed exile. They hoped to accomplish their aim through their incessant vexations, and they did so. At the beginning of 1706, the Brothers, disgusted and wearied by these unrelenting inspections and bothered more than ever in their work, asked their Superior to let them leave and give up a position that they could no longer defend. After taking the advice of several enlightened persons, De La Salle allowed them to do so.

## The schools are closed as the Brothers withdraw

The Brothers simply disappeared, and the schools remained shut the next day. Nobody knew why or what had become of the Brothers. Rumors spread, and with time, the story took on additional details. At first, people thought that the Brothers had given an extraordinary holiday to their students or that illness or some important business had led to their departure. But when those theories lost credibility because of the prolonged absence of the Brothers, people began to fear that the closing of the schools might last indefinitely and that the schools themselves might be permanently discontinued, to the great detriment of the public. Fear caused more turmoil than ever and led parents interested in the instruction of their children, who were already beginning to run wild in the streets and to show by their incipient mischief-making the need they had of Christian education, to go to the parish priest to ask for a solution to the problem.

A great many parents, therefore, visited De La Chétardie to make known to him how sorry they were over the departure of the Brothers, how impossible it was for them to give their children the instruction and education they needed or to send them to the classes of teachers who had to be paid for their services. They praised the ability of the Brothers to instruct the children, to make them docile, well-behaved and pious, whereas apart from their influence, they showed

themselves ignorant and unmanageable, misbehaved, and were lacking in seriousness. They added that since the closing of the schools, all these unfortunate consequences were becoming obvious.

## De La Chétardie takes measures to restore peace in the schools

These spontaneous and touching remonstrances took effect. De La Chétardie was moved. This charitable pastor, entirely devoted to the welfare of his parishioners, a man who exhibited a special tenderness toward the poor, calmed their fears by promising them to get the Brothers back. Never did he understand better the need his parish had of those men, the good they were doing, the services they rendered to the public, and the advantage religion drew from such useful servants. De La Chétardie requested De La Salle to reopen the Gratuitous Schools, assured him that the Brothers would no longer be disturbed, and promised that he himself would see to it.

He kept his word. He called a meeting of the main officers of the guild of writing masters and had a document drawn up in their presence and certified by two notaries,. This act stated that it was he, De La Chétardie, who had commissioned the Brothers, each identified by the family name, to teach in the Charity Schools of his parish; that John Baptist de La Salle, priest and doctor of theology, had been most regrettably interfered with in that regard by the writing masters, since he had employed his disciples in the work only by De La Chétardie's orders, at his expense, and in conformity with his directions; that he, the parish priest, had in the matter merely been following the example of his predecessors, who had called De La Salle to Paris with his disciples to render service to the poor children of the parish; that the rent on the classroom building, as well as on the lodgings of the teachers, was paid for by the parish priest himself; finally, that it was he who had always provided food and lodging to the Brothers named in the document, that he intended them to continue their work in full liberty, and that he was having this present act drawn up so that all concerned might take note of it and be guided by it.

The document was sent to the holy Founder, who was satisfied with it. Thus, after an interruption of three weeks, he sent the Brothers back to the schools. The act of authority on the part of the parish priest proved an effective restraint on the ill humor and animosity of the writing masters, at least as long as De La Chétardie remained resolved to maintain his position. Calm was restored in the Christian Schools for some time, and the Brothers were able to resume their teaching. Although peace came to them once more, De La Salle did

not enjoy it personally. The battle against his disciples had died down, but the opposition against him continued.

The parish priest would not abandon his preconceptions, and he refused his consideration to the father even while granting it to his children. The servant of God was extremely hurt by his attitude and did not know what he should do to win back the favor of a pastor so respectable by reason of his great age and his outstanding merit, a man whom he loved, honored, and admired by inclination and through gratitude for so many favors received from him. He paid a call on De La Chétardie, and although he was ungraciously received, he did what he could to dissipate the bias in the pastor's mind and to melt the ice in his heart. In spite of having to face the coldness on the visage of the parish priest, he tried to approach him and to overcome the prejudice shown by a man who was so necessary to him. It was all in vain. God permitted the trial to purify his servant's virtue and to show him that he alone was the true support of his Institute.

The fact is that at the time, outside of God, De La Salle had no resource to count on and not a friend in Paris. Everything was against him, and he met with nothing but opposition at every step. At that very time, he had to endure a grave and painful trial, one that he would hardly have expected from a man like De La Chétardie. He paid the salary due to the Brothers employed in his parish schools by giving him state-issued paper money. The notes were highly suspect to people at the time and were quite useless in his hands, and so he was not able to buy provisions for the community, since neither butcher nor baker would accept the notes, nor indeed would anyone else. Nonetheless, the Brothers had to live and needed food. De La Salle had paper money, but he had nothing with which he could buy food. His great poverty, aggravated by the turn of events, threw him into extreme embarrassment, but God, in whom he confided, delivered him from it and helped him change the worthless paper into real money. Either out of pity or out of charity or from some other motive, certain persons did him the favor of exchanging the state notes for coin. That fact amazed all those who learned of it, no one more so than the parish priest himself, who with all his influence would not have been able to bring off such a miracle.

When he had spent all this sum, De La Salle returned to the parish priest for the balance of the salary due. All he received was an ungracious refusal, and he came away with neither coins nor notes. The refusal placed him in a more painful quandary than ever. There was nothing to eat in the house. All purses were closed to him, and where he was concerned, people seemed to think it was all right to be lack-

ing in charity. He believed, more strongly than ever at this point, that the cause of this ill treatment was his own person; he had become objectionable. His sorrow was increased by the fact that while he alone was the object of persecution, it was his disciples who had become its victims. He felt that he was the Jonah who must be cast overboard and that once he had disappeared, the tempest and the famine would cease.

## De Salle disappears to make a retreat with the Carmelites

It did not take him long to test his theory. Here is the innocent stratagem he made use of to obtain the money needed to provide for the Brothers. All of a sudden, he became invisible. He went into hiding in the monastery of the Discalced Carmelites and took advantage of the circumstances to make a fifteen-day retreat there. Nobody knew where he was, except two or three of his principal disciples to whom he had revealed the secret. Meanwhile, one of the Brothers, who was well liked by De La Chétardie, approached him, as De La Salle had instructed him to do. After asking for the money due to the Brothers, he mentioned that their Superior had vanished and that no one knew where. The parish priest, surprised at the news, immediately gave him all the money he wanted. That was not the first time that the Brother,[10] always welcome at the house of the parish priest, had been employed by the servant of God to obtain what he himself had been refused.

Thinking that De La Salle was far away, the pastor wished to seize the opportunity for substituting another Superior in his stead. The one he would have wished to install was none other than that same Brother, a mere serving Brother. It is true that he was an imposing looking figure with a venerable aspect, but he was also very simple and not well educated. He spoke badly, and since he could not express himself fluently, he was incapable of occupying the place offered to him. He was born to obey and could only follow the directions received from another. The parish priest urged him several times to accept the role of Superior, but the Brother was embarrassed by this and could not listen without sorrow to such an offer, which humiliated him but did not tempt him or go to his head. He loved his Superior sincerely and was firmly attached to him. He honored him as a saint and would have considered himself a vile usurper if he had tried to oust him; he would have been looked upon by the other Brothers with horror.

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10. Brother Thomas Frappet, for many years bursar of the Community.

While all this was going on, De La Salle, the pious victim of persecution, was free of all his cares and employed his leisure in prayer and contemplation. His attraction for interior prayer was so great that this exercise was for him like his native element, his food and drink. Never could he sufficiently satisfy his inclination in this regard. We might suppose that in the retirement and solitude of Saint Yon, he would have eaten his fill of the Bread of Life which he enjoyed there, but he became only more avid for it. When he had to take up again the concerns and occupations of Martha, he felt a stronger yearning than ever for the repose of Magdalen, either to purify his soul by a general examination of his life or to plunge himself into God's bosom and attain a more intimate union with the One whom his heart loved and whose absence he considered his greatest torment. He felt special devotion toward Saint Teresa, that great lover of Jesus and of his cross, from whose writings he had imbibed his great spirit of interior prayer and his love for suffering. Combined with the special regard he entertained toward her spiritual children, who make profession of leading a deeply interior and contemplative life, his devotion had led him to choose their monastery to make his retreat. After spending fifteen days there in deepest recollection and intimate communication with God, fortified by prayer and by strength imparted from on high, he left with new courage to face new trials.

Reappearing amidst his disciples as suddenly as he had left, the Founder made them all happy by his return. They had been concerned about him during his absence and did not know what to think. His presence brought back calm, and they profited by the new insights that this Moses had drawn from his retreat. Like him, they felt themselves moved with renewed ardor to acquire the perfection of their state and to show patience under persecution. They did well to prepare themselves for it thus, because it broke out again as soon as the servant of God returned. Because he was filled with the spirit of Jesus Christ, the cross followed him everywhere. The devil could not let him live in peace.

## Persecution begins again with the Founder's return

In vain, the servant of God did all he could to remain hidden in the Brothers' house. His return was soon known in the parish and provided his enemies with a fresh opportunity to renew their harassment in the hope of making him leave Paris and never come back. The fact was that they had never lost sight of their primary objective: to change the form of government of the Institute and to modify both its

spirit and its Rule. As De La Salle had not been willing to go along with their desires in that regard, he had become obnoxious to them. They had moved heaven and earth to get rid of him, as we have seen above, and to make the Brothers dissatisfied with him. Not having succeeded in their attempt, they were trying to reach their ends by another way, namely, by stirring up so much trouble in Paris that he would be obliged to leave the city. They felt sure that in his absence, they would be able to accomplish what they despaired of bringing about in his presence.

It must always be remembered that his worst adversaries were secret enemies who would have been greatly annoyed had their animosity been revealed openly. They were worthy men with a notable reputation for virtue, and they thought that by persecuting his servant, they were rendering a signal service to God. As they saw it, De La Salle had indeed conceived an idea, the outcome of genius, but he was not capable of putting it into execution. His Institute was important for the good of the Church, but it needed someone else to bring it to its full development. Those who thought in this way considered themselves called to complete what the servant of God had begun.

Having found him docile to their suggestions, as long as these did not alter the spirit of his Society, they had declared themselves its supporters, but later on, finding him inflexible with regard to the changes they wished to introduce into his organization, they had come to dislike him. They had misrepresented him to the archdiocesan chancery as a narrow-minded man incapable of governing. They had tried to incite his disciples to revolt against him and to make them dissatisfied with his person and his manner of governing. Failing in this, they had stirred up the rivalry of the writing masters in Paris against the Gratuitous Schools. On this point, they had achieved momentary success. Now they did not give up hope of winning the total victory so long awaited. They thought that by renewing the struggle, they would oblige the holy priest to withdraw from Paris and abandon this battlefield. After that, they could lay down the law to the Brothers, introduce new rules among them, abolish their long-standing practices, and install a new Superior under whose name they themselves would actually govern the Society.

The enemies of the servant of God, who had not lost sight of their previous designs, once again tried to rob the Brothers of the protection of the parish priest of Saint Sulpice and to disparage their Superior. In this they succeeded. Even the greatest men have their weaknesses; there is always in them a human side. They are not exempt from prepossessions; when they give in to them, they act out of

prejudice as others do through passion. While seeking nothing but God, it happens that they end up by warring on his greatest servants; on the pretext of virtue, they combat the most virtuous of men.

De La Chétardie, although enlightened, full of the best intentions, and sincerely pious, did not in that affair show sufficient distrust of himself and of those who sought to turn him against the holy Founder. He became the dupe of their false zeal and their instrument in causing new grief for De La Salle. The Founder suffered the trial like a true saint. No word of complaint, no murmur, no sign of sorrow revealed his affliction to those with whom he lived. On the contrary, his joy seemed to redouble in the midst of his trials and to grow with them. Never did he seem more unruffled; those who were ignorant of what was going on imagined that everything was happening as he wished and that calm finally had followed the tempest. With the exception of the Brother whose ascendancy over the parish priest he made use of and the Brother Director, nobody else knew anything about the unpleasant circumstances with which he was struggling. He kept total silence about all that was happening to him and that concerned him personally. He spoke of it only to God.

## De La Salle closes the schools a second time

There would be no point in detailing the various trials that his opponents caused the Founder. To sum it all up, it went so far that in the end, he felt himself obliged to yield lest the persecution might extend from his person to that of his disciples, as usually happened. They were beginning to grow discouraged. Worn out by the struggle, they began to lose heart under these violent attacks, in spite of everything he could say to comfort them. Eventually, convinced that so radical an evil could be cured only by violent remedies, the Founder ordered all the schools closed and sent the Brothers, two by two, to various other houses. Only the Director remained in Paris to keep watch over the house and to speak with persons who might come to inquire what had happened. That was in July 1706, when De La Salle was living in the house in Saint Roch parish.

The reason why the holy Founder decided to withdraw the Brothers and to discontinue their classes was the new campaign of intimidation launched against them by the writing masters, who were secretly urged on and abetted. They constantly came to the schools to cause trouble, forced the students to leave, insulted the Brothers, and threatened them with prison. The pretext for all these vexations was the same old one: they claimed that in the Gratuitous Schools were

children whose parents were not paupers. As the parish priest knew what was going on but said not a word, the writing masters took his silence for approval, and that gave them all the liberty they wanted. They carried it even to insolence.

De La Chétardie, however, had not expected that the tragedy would end by the departure of the Brothers. If he had, his zeal for the Christian Schools would have made him speak up and do so with the authoritative tone he knew, better than anyone, how to assume when necessary. That would have reduced the foes of the Institute to silence and put an end to their hostility. He was, then, greatly surprised when he learned that the schools had been closed suddenly, nor was it difficult for him to guess why and to realize that it was his own fault for leaving those innocent men defenseless against their antagonists.

The classes remained shut for three months, to the great regret of the public. It did not take long for the ill effects the closing caused in the parish to become obvious. Most of the fathers and mothers complained bitterly to the parish priest. The poor, who were losing such a valuable opportunity for the instruction of their children, were in despair. Meanwhile, the enemies of the holy priest congratulated themselves over their victory. To make it complete, they suggested to De La Chétardie that he should look for other teachers to conduct the Gratuitous Schools. After all, the schools themselves were certainly needed, and the zealous pastor did not want to see them discontinued, nor did he wish to deprive the poor in his parish of so necessary a means of salvation. He had even promised those who had come to complain to him that he would immediately set about restoring the situation to what it had been.

Those who had been interested in getting rid of the Brothers brought forward a number of candidates to replace them. They were mostly former Brothers who had left the Institute, but apart from the fact that there were not enough of them to staff all the classes, the parish priest was not satisfied with them. The charity that had once inspired them had given place to cupidity. They refused to work for the miserly salaries paid the Brothers, who—like Saint Paul—were content with the bare necessities of life.

## Measures taken by the pastor to prevent further harassment

De La Chétardie was, therefore, obliged to try to get the former teachers back, to the great disappointment of those who had labored so hard to force them out. He let his intentions be known to De La Salle, who was prepared to obey, meek as a lamb, without allowing himself

any complaint or reproach to the priest who had abandoned him to the harassment of his opponents. Delighted to know that the servant of God was prepared to send the Brothers back, De La Chétardie wrote and asked him to come back to reopen the schools as soon as possible.

The holy priest answered that he had preferred to yield to the circumstances rather than to be exposed to the perpetual disturbances which had caused so much harm to the Brothers. He mentioned that the way they had been treated recently had discouraged several and that it was not possible for him to find replacements for them on such short notice. He added that he was unwilling to send Brothers back to Saint Sulpice unless he was given assurances that they would be able to carry on their work in peace under the protection of the parish priest. Finally, the wise Superior, to make sure that he would thenceforth be shielded from all such vexations which had annoyed the Brothers and disrupted their schools, ordered the Director, who had remained alone in the residence, to negotiate with the parish priest and to make sure that there would be no further danger of similar ordeals in the future.

By order of De La Chétardie, the requested measures were taken; the holy Founder immediately recalled the Brothers from the provinces. Twelve of them came back to the parish of Saint Sulpice: ten to teach, one to take care of temporal affairs, and one to be Director of the establishment. Their salaries were regulated on the basis which still exists today. At the request of the Brother so well liked by the parish priest, he condescended to pay them for the three months during which the schools had been closed and also to defray the traveling expenses of the Brothers who were being recalled. That act of charity was indeed necessary, because the poverty of the Brothers was such that they would not have been able to meet these expenses.

This reconciliation had hardly been concluded when it almost broke down because of an untoward event. De La Salle had sent the Brother so well liked by De La Chétardie on an errand to the provinces without advising the parish priest. Because the latter was highly incensed at the assignment, the order had to be countermanded immediately, lest the enemies of De La Salle might use the circumstance to smear him and once more poison the mind of the pastor against him.

The schools reopened at the beginning of October 1706 and were at once filled. The impatience with which the people had waited for the reopening was followed by outbursts of joy on their part. Their reaction once again made plain to the public at large and to the

parish priest of Saint Sulpice what an invaluable resource it is for the instruction of youth to have Charity Schools staffed by teachers who are as pious as they are competent.

So that in the future the writing masters might not cause any more trouble in the schools that were the objects of their jealousy, De La Chétardie sent Abbé de Gergy, his vicar at this time and today his successor as parish priest of Saint Sulpice, to investigate the financial standing of the families of the pupils. The pious priest spent several weeks doing so, and he drew up a list of the students' names, ages, and addresses. The Brothers were told to admit only those who presented a note signed by a priest from the Community of Saint Sulpice who was designated by the pastor to verify the financial status of the parents of the children.

Fathers and mothers were required by this ritual to come from all over the parish to obtain a ticket, which was like a key which opened the doors of the Gratuitous Schools for their children. The procedure disarmed the writing masters completely and deprived them of any pretext for further harassment. It protected the Brothers and their schools and brought peace and quiet back to them; yet, they did not lose a single student. The gratuitous classes were filled as usual, and no child asking for admission was turned away. The large number of pupils, a fresh source of displeasure and disappointment for the masters in Paris, would no longer excuse them for causing trouble.

This issuing of tickets which protected the schools from any invidious visitations, when all was said and done, was nothing but a pure formality, for the same students whose supposedly easy circumstances had provided a pretext for the lawsuits filed by the writing masters returned to the Brothers with their tickets duly signed. The priest in charge felt that in conscience he could not refuse them. Better informed than the writing masters about the family resources and unwilling to conform his judgment to the masters' imagination, he did not feel justified in classifying as rich those people who had a little money, but also a large family, or who owned well-stocked stores but owed more than they possessed.

Thus this epic struggle between the Brothers and their rivals finally subsided. As all this had merely been used as a weapon by De La Salle's enemies to strike at him, their agitation died down somewhat. This new period of calm permitted the opening of new schools, which we shall relate after mentioning the new residence occupied by the Brothers at Saint Sulpice.

For over eighteen years, the Brothers had lodged in the rue Princesse, where one of the parish schools was situated. The house was

very inconvenient on account of its location; it was open on all sides, so that over twenty families could see what went on. The Brothers could not leave the house without being noticed nor go out to enjoy a breath of fresh air in the courtyard during recreation without being spied on by curious and malicious eyes. This constraint kept them uneasy in a residence which had no garden and was too small for the number of Brothers. The difficulty was not to find a more commodious house but to get the parish priest of Saint Sulpice to agree to the move.

To bring that about, De La Salle, who had still not managed to recover the good graces of his virtuous pastor, thought that while he himself kept in the background, he should make use of the influence of the Brother whom the pastor liked. That Brother started looking for a more suitable residence and did not take long to find one. The house, belonging to Abbé de Mascarani, was located near the Sêves gate, in the same quarter as the Hospital for Incurables, and was just what the Brothers needed: it offered plenty of fresh air, was solitary, easily adapted to the Brothers' style of life, and had a garden. The holy Founder went to visit the place in secret and liked it very much. He told the Brother who had found it to try his best to secure it for the Community. The Brother obeyed, and success rewarded his obedience.

De La Chétardie agreed to the request as soon as the Brother explained the reasons for the change, and the pastor congratulated him on finding the right place. De La Chétardie was confirmed in the opinion he had formed of the house by the report made to him by Abbé Languet de Gergy, whom he had sent at once with the Brother to look it over. He then gave orders to rent it. The holy priest was surprised when he was told that De La Chétardie consented so quickly, and at the same time, he felt much satisfaction because Divine Providence, at last, had made available to the Brothers in Paris a convenient residence, secluded and conducive to great regularity. In this event, De La Salle admired the goodness of God, who out of all the afflictions and contradictions he had suffered, had drawn and had turned in their favor, at least for a moment, a heart so long poisoned against him.

A few months later, the school in the parish of Saint Roch was entrusted to other teachers, and De La Salle was obliged to transfer his residence to the new house. The following year, 1709, which caused so much hardship on account of the famine and the long and rigorous winter, he was fortunate, indeed, in also being able to find there a lodging for the novices, who had come seeking the necessities of life

in the capital. The novitiate, thus established in a place so conducive to fervor, remained there for seven years; the school, meanwhile, continued to function in the classrooms that the parish had rented in rue Princesse. The new residence, so well adapted to requirements, cost 400 livres a year. It was occupied by the Brothers until 1722, at which date they moved to another residence, near Sainte Técla. That was an even more commodious dwelling, where they settled down in permanent fashion.

# CHAPTER VI

*New foundations at Dijon, Mende, Alais, Grenoble, and Saint-Denis-en-France*

Although the foundation of the Brothers' school in Dijon followed that of Darnétal, we have delayed speaking of it, in order to relate in one place its history and that of several establishments which followed and in order not to break the continuity of the holy Founder's life.

## The foundation at Dijon

The Christian School in Dijon was opened thanks both to Monsieur Rigolet, first president of the Chamber of Accounts of that city, and to his illustrious family, which can truly be called a family of saints. Father, mother, and children all cooperated with holy rivalry in this good work. The father began it; his wife supported it, and their children brought it to completion. Rigolet was a model for the entire city. He appeared in public only insofar as his duties required; otherwise, he was a lover of retirement, prayer, and good works. The life he led kept him always prepared for his Holy Communion, which, it was said, he had been authorized to receive daily.[11] In a most obliging letter he wrote to the holy Founder, this religious magistrate offered him a place to lodge the two Brothers and 400 livres a year as their salary. De La Salle accepted his proposal, and two Brothers left at once for Dijon, where they began classes in June 1705.

As long as the pious magistrate lived, he granted his protection to the Brothers. The same charity which had led him to endow Christian and Gratuitous Schools in his native city also inspired him with great

11. A rare privilege at a time when frequent Communion was discouraged.

zeal to support and develop them. Although he did not live long enough to do them all the good he had planned on doing, his illustrious children proved themselves true heirs to his zeal. The Brothers lost this devoted friend about the year 1716. When he died, he was buried by the parish priest of Saint Sulpice, his brother-in-law, in the chapel of Saint Charles, with all the honors due to his rank.

His wife, a sister of the archbishop of Sens and of Abbé Languet de Gergy, was a woman of eminent virtue who deserved to be called the mother of the poor because of her tender charity toward them. After her husband's death, she continued to support the schools with a zeal like his. Equally edifying, the children, who inherited the zeal and piety of their parents, joined with M. de Rochefort, a councillor in the parliament and a relative of M. Rigolet, in enlarging the establishment set up by their parents, with the result that four other Brothers had to be added to the staff. Thus the Christian and Gratuitous Schools are now functioning with great success and with God's blessing in three sections of the city of Dijon with the approval of the mayor and councilmen, who welcomed them by an official proclamation.

## The foundation at Mende

The founding of the Christian Schools in Mende, the capital of Gévaudan, was the result of the pious solicitude of the bishop, Monsieur de Piancourt. This city became the place where De La Salle gave proof of his heroic humility. No one ever showed a more earnest desire to have the Brothers and more zeal for the instruction of youth than this illustrious prelate whose charity despoiled him, before his death, of all his property in favor of the poor and other good works. Toward the end of his holy life, filled with merit and entirely devoted to the labors of his ministry and the welfare of his diocese, the prelate wished to put the crowning touch on his benefactions by founding several Gratuitous Schools and a general hospice for the poor. Considering this double undertaking in favor of the poor as the final deed of his charity, he would have died thinking he had not done for his people all that his zeal inspired him to do, had he not left them these two foundations to alleviate their spiritual and temporal needs.

The bishop himself, in his testament which was dated 19 October 1707, wrote as follows: "The salvation of people and their temporal happiness depend mainly on the proper education of youth, both boys and girls. In addition to the tokens of affection and predilection which we have given to the citizens of our beloved city of Mende by building and endowing for them a general hospice, a permanent and

universal asylum for all the natural calamities and reverses of fortune which can happen to them during life, we feel that we cannot leave them a greater proof of our affection than by endowing schools which will provide them with everything which can contribute to the salvation of their souls and to their temporal felicity."

In fact, as soon as he learned that there existed in Paris a group of schoolmasters inspired by pure charity and dedicated by vocation to the Christian education and instruction of poor children and that M. de La Salle, former canon of Reims and a doctor of theology, their father and Founder, who was in charge of this new sort of seminary, spent all his time in training and sanctifying these men, the bishop hastened to enrich his diocese by acquiring some Brothers for it. He thus put the finishing touch on his good works by endowing the Gratuitous Schools.

Unfortunately, at that particular time, the holy priest was not able to satisfy fully the desires of the saintly bishop, because he lacked Brothers. Some had grown disenchanted, and others had been driven away by the series of persecutions we have spoken of. Nevertheless, delighted to find so much zeal in this great bishop, the Founder did what he could to cooperate with him; he sent one Brother to begin the Gratuitous School and to give the bishop an idea of what the Brothers were capable of doing. He also promised to send more as soon as possible. The Brother dispatched to Mende[12] succeeded better than the bishop had dared hope. So satisfied was he that he wrote to De La Salle a second time, begging him to send another Brother.

Here are his words on this occasion: "My dear Monsieur, I cannot sufficiently bless God, who inspired you with the idea of training schoolmasters to instruct the young and bring them up in Christian piety. Seminaries train good ecclesiastics, but good schoolmasters, who give children the first impressions of piety and religion, can help to sanctify all Christians. Nobody could be more pleased than I am with the Brother you sent, who, while awaiting a second to help him, has already begun instructing our young people. I should be extremely obliged to you if you sent us another able to teach both writing and arithmetic, because this will attract all the youngsters, and thus we can impart to them the rudiments of Christian piety.

"For my part, I will give the Brothers all the protection they can expect from me, so that they may be completely satisfied by their labors in this city. Brother *** can tell you of my high regard for him

12. Brother Ponce, who had opened the school in Darnétal and later was Director in Rouen. He eventually left the Institute.

and for the school. Please see to it that my regard may increase more and more, thanks to the good choice you will make of the teachers you will send me. I shall be most obliged to you. Assuring you of my most particular esteem, I beg you to believe me your very humble and obedient servant. F. P. de Piancourt, Bishop of Mende. At Mende, this 8 April 1707."

The second Brother succeeded as well as the first. The two of them could see the harvest growing so much in their hands that they alone were not sufficient for the task. The third Brother who came to help them found as much to do as the first two and had equal reason to feel consoled over the results. The pious bishop could not have experienced a keener joy as he saw his days drawing to a close. To avoid leaving his undertakings incomplete after beginning them so successfully, and lest death might surprise him, he made his will, leaving to the Brothers an income of 510 livres as an endowment, along with the house where they lived, and an income of 250 livres for the two schoolmistresses at the girls' school.

It would seem that God was waiting for nothing more from this pious prelate than the definite endowment of these good works before calling him to the reward due to him for all his efforts. Not long after making these arrangements, he died, to the great regret of the Brothers, who had known him too late and lost him too soon. They were right to deplore his demise, because it brought uncertain days to the Gratuitous Schools he had founded and threatened them with ruin. The Brothers who came after the first three—and proved very different from them—made their holy Superior practice heroic patience. Their insolence provided him with an opportunity of leaving to all his disciples a rare example of meekness and Christian humility.

This is what happened. Three unworthy followers of such a virtuous leader had been sent to Mende after the collapse of the novitiate in Provence, which we shall speak of shortly. They separated from the others and created a sort of schism in their Society. They did not wish to have anything to do with the other Brothers and refused to obey their legitimate Superior. Their irregularity was the occasion of their schism. These tepid and relaxed religious, far from the vigilant eyes of their Superior and without the example of their Brothers and the support of the Rule, had become their own masters, did what they liked, and by following their natural bent, traced out for themselves a path to perdition. Little by little, from a life lived without constraint or restraint, they passed on to a tepid and sensual existence which led to grave disorders. De La Salle bewailed their change and, like a good father, did all he could to make his unruly children come to their

senses. They had imitated the prodigal son in their waywardness but not in their repentance.

Those incurably sick men, who were only emboldened by mild treatment, might have been brought back to their duty by sternness and punishment, but that solution seemed too risky. The best remedy for their hardness of heart was, no doubt, to remove them from the place where they had grown so lax and to send them back to the novitiate, so that they could reflect on what they had done and take up again the true spirit of their state. But that was not an easy solution. De La Salle had the right to act thus, since the foundation had been made in his name and was a part of his Society. Those children of Belial knew his right and feared it, for they were resolved to throw off the yoke of obedience. To parry such a move, they managed to circumvent Bishop de Piancourt's successor as well as the city officials. They succeeded in winning these gentlemen over to such an extent that it was not possible to send the three Brothers away from Mende.

The holy Founder, who was ignorant of all these schemes, was not a little surprised, when he went to pay his respects to the new bishop of Mende, to hear him say, as though he were a master threatening a servant, that De La Salle was not to withdraw any of the Brothers from Mende: he would not accept any others and would send back any who came to replace them. The Founder's astonishment grew even greater when he heard the senior judge and councillor, who is the mayor of this city, speak in similar terms.

If the virtuous Superior had wished to reply, he could have had plenty to say that would have opened the eyes of those gentlemen who had been circumvented by rebellious subjects. He could have pointed out that the irregular life of those Brothers showed the danger of leaving them in the place which had given them an opportunity for relaxation. He might have appealed to the testament of Bishop de Piancourt to justify his making such changes, but he was not inclined to argue. His humility led him to give in and remain silent every time. That is what he did once more on this occasion; he let his silence and calm demeanor give proof that he was in the right, and thus he vindicated his conduct.

During all this time, the holy Superior was residing with his rebellious Brothers but did not show any ill humor over their deceitful and disloyal conduct. He dwelt with them as with any other Brothers, hoping to convince by his good example those whom he could not correct with authority. He was not welcome, however, among the three Brothers, who brooked no interference and who, impatient to

resume their former manner of living, would have preferred to see him out of the way, since he prevented them from doing as they would have liked. The presence of a saint was burdensome to them. Worse, it became a torment for those wretched men. They resented his example even more than his remonstrances, because his example covered them with confusion, became a silent monitor, and addressed to them more pungent reproaches than the most severe admonitions could have done. To get rid of the mute censor, they adopted the most expeditious means, which was to put him out of the house and send him away.

One of them took it upon himself to carry out that commission and insolently told De La Salle that if he wanted to stay with them, he would have to pay for his board. Such rudeness would have shocked him if the remarks that the rebels had already caused the bishop and the magistrates to make to him had not prepared him for it. The affront might certainly have aroused indignation in anyone less accustomed to insults and less dead to himself than the holy priest. In similar circumstances, even the least sensitive of men would have felt justified in taking up the contract of the foundation and showing the three mutineers the terms of the document which authorized him to put them out instead. If he had done so, we could only have praised his wisdom and firmness.

Some may think that he should have acted in that fashion, because the only way to deal with the frenzy of pride is with a cauterizing iron. Proud persons must be obliged to bend their backs before the weight of authority. It is commonly asserted that a superior who does not know how to make his subjects obey does not know how to govern, that the art of reducing rebels to submission is the art of commanding well. The saints, however, act according to other insights than do the rest of us. Their wisdom is from above, and it inspires them with maxims far different than those inspired by human prudence. De La Salle's wisdom led him to humble himself in all things, to give in always, and to profit by all the opportunities that Divine Providence furnished him to abase himself beneath the feet of all, even of his own disciples. His example in this situation was not the first he had given the Brothers in such circumstances; we have already mentioned several others.

To appreciate the extent to which the holy priest put aside his own dignity in that instance, we should mention that the one who treated his good father and Superior so outrageously was the son of a poor cobbler from Picardy whom he had taken in through charity and brought up carefully in his Community. He had accepted him when

the young man was ignorant, incapable of doing anything, not even knowing how to read and write. He had made an excellent teacher of him, had made him, in fact, all he was. The ingrate forgot all that; he forgot who he was and no longer recognized in his father, benefactor, and Superior the one who had lifted him up and who could still set him down again as he had been before. The churlish words of the arrogant disciple deserved the reply made by an emperor to an ungrateful patriarch whom he had appointed: *O man of nothing, it was I who raised you up; man of nothing, I will bring you down again into the dust whence you came.*

But the rebel knew to whom he was speaking. He knew that he was speaking to one whose humility surpassed his own pride. He had learned from other striking examples of humility given by the holy priest that he only kept quiet on such occasions and bowed his head beneath the hand that humiliated him. He saw that happen again a final time, to his own misfortune. The saintly Superior heard the outrageous words but said nothing. Even his silence, which cried out louder than the bitterest complaints or the most stinging reproaches, did not touch his hard-hearted disciple. The latter saw his father, whom he was driving from his own house, withdraw without a word, calm and full of joy, and go to seek shelter under a stranger's roof.

Such impious conduct only led the defiant and ungrateful son down into a deeper abyss. Having raised the standard of rebellion, he got rid of the third Brother, had himself tonsured, hired a serving woman, and committed a thousand other scandalous infractions of his Rule while still wearing the habit of the Institute to which he no longer belonged but which he kept on wearing through the instigation of the devil in order to dishonor it. It is true that he could not put aside his habit without losing the endowment funds, because Bishop de Piancourt had inserted in his will the express clause that the schools which he was establishing would be attached to the Society of the Brothers founded by De La Salle. So it was not through any sentiment of religion but through concern for his own interests that this schismatic kept the habit of an Institute which he had disowned.

Along with his companion, he perpetuated this scandal for about ten years. At the end of that time, divine justice seemed to demand vengeance upon them for their misdeeds. Both of them died of the pestilence which spread from Marseille to Mende, bringing desolation with it. The schools remained closed for two years, after which time, three more Brothers arrived to reopen them at the request of the bishop and some of the principal officials of the town. That was about 1724.

The scandalous behavior of the deceased Brothers had made the bishop and the city councillors regret having given them their backing. It served as a proof that the branch separated from the trunk dries up and perishes and that inferiors who break away from dependence on their Superior sooner or later become frightening examples of men whom God abandons. Although those various events happened at different times, we have grouped them here so that by anticipating a little, we might present a more continuous story. That is what we have nearly always done in relating the establishment of the Brothers and of the Gratuitous Schools so as not to interrupt the thread of our narrative.[13]

## The foundation at Alais

The founding of the Christian Schools at Alais followed shortly after that of Mende. No city in the whole kingdom had more need of such a charitable endeavor. The remembrance of the horrible ravages that the rebellious Huguenots committed in the Cévennes has not entirely died away even now. That region, reddened by the blood of Catholics, was the scene of the last convulsive stand of Calvinism in France. There, more than anywhere else, heresy combined with fanaticism made use of fire and sword, showing the hatred that hell inspires toward the faithful members of the Roman Church. Catholics were torn to pieces, beheaded, and suffered martyrdom by new sorts of torments inflicted with unheard-of cruelty. We can read about it in the history which has been written on the subject. Finally vanquished and forced into its last stronghold, Calvinism fell victim to its own frenzy and had to yield to the arms of Marshal Villars, whom King Louis XIV sent to give the last blow to the cruel hydra that Calvin had nurtured for the misfortune of his own country and that for over a century had brought death and carnage wherever it went.

This great king, who finally exterminated the pernicious error lurking under the mask of reform and which had caused his ancestors to tremble and had so long desolated France, wished to triumph over it as a Christian prince should. The only vengeance he sought for the spilled blood of his subjects was the conversion of those who had shed it or had a hand in shedding it. The project was laudable and truly worthy of the religious spirit of him who had conceived it. It was not easy to carry out.

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13. Later historians have pointed out the serious inaccuracies in Blain's account of this so-called schism at Mende.

It can be said, in all truth, that it was less difficult to defeat those rebellious fanatics than to convert them when their hands still ran with the blood of Catholics and their hearts still thirsted for murder and carnage. Some had made a religion for themselves out of their violence and considered it a duty of piety to kill and slaughter. Others thought themselves called to fight the Lord's battles by revolting against their king. Still others claimed to be inspired and moved by divine power when they became the executioners of their fellow citizens. Few, indeed, of these were much inclined to return to the bosom of the Church which they had just been lacerating.

Nevertheless, that was the laudable project that Louis XIV conceived, and to bring it about, he took the right measures. Two kinds of people, very different from each other, were needed in order to accomplish this task: soldiers and evangelical laborers. The former had to keep the rebels subdued while the latter taught them and tried to deliver them from their errors. Without the former, the latter were in danger of becoming the victims of that false zeal which is so easily rekindled. Without the latter, the former would have succeeded only in fomenting more disorder and in increasing irreligion.

Military forces were stationed all over the country, for there was everything to fear from subjects who were apparently subdued but remained rebellious in their hearts. Experience had taught that this fire hidden beneath the ashes could burst into flame again in a moment and cause new conflagrations. It was, therefore, necessary to pose sentinels to keep constant watch and to hold other forces in readiness to extinguish the flames if they broke out again. This had to be done first, and so it was.

The king's troops occupied all the cities and towns of any consequence where there was danger of mutiny, and they fulfilled their proper duty. They overawed the wandering preachers who spoke of nothing but charity and acted only from fear. The king's militia imposed on those fierce and bloodthirsty souls the peace and tranquillity that the sacred ministry demands.

Once order and calm returned, the prince called for volunteer Gospel missionaries to replace those who had fallen victim to the fanatical fury of the heretics. These missionaries needed a leader to direct them in this work and guide them in their apostolate. This leader, according to Christ's institution, is the bishop. It was felt that to cause religion to flourish and make progress in the areas where error and fanaticism had so long ruled, a new bishopric was needed. Consequently, the city and territory of Alais were separated from the diocese of Nîmes by Louis XIV, and Innocent XII erected a new diocese there.

François Maurice, the superior of the royal missionaries of the area, was chosen to be the first bishop. His first thought was to find worthy ministers to help him in his task, men who could work with him at uprooting and planting, tearing down and building up again, in a zone where the heresy once banished from the kingdom had taken refuge and where hardly one family in twelve was Catholic. Among the zealous laborers whom he recruited to help him was M. Mérez, a canon of Nîmes noted for his zeal for the salvation of souls. The bishop appointed him vicar-general and head of the new cathedral chapter.

The two of them, whom long experience had made experts in the art of winning souls to God, judged that among all the new religious institutions needed to oppose the heresy dominant in this part of France, the most necessary were schools taught by pious and skillful schoolmasters. The origin of the uprisings of the fanatics in the Cévennes confirmed them in this conviction, for the history of this revolt tells us, in fact, that it was an outlaw schoolmaster who lit the first fires of what became such a huge conflagration. They drew the conclusion that in order to destroy the evil by the same principle which had given rise to it, they needed to call in zealous schoolmasters who would give the people an example of outstanding Catholic living. Those trained by De La Salle already enjoyed a high reputation. Their regular life and their pedagogical talent had made them known throughout the kingdom. Their outstanding merit had brought their renown as far as the Cévennes. There Mérez learned that De La Salle, a fellow seminarian at Saint Sulpice, had given up all his wealth and his canonry in order to endow the Church with a new family of catechists and schoolmasters capable of sowing the first seeds of religion in young hearts.

M. Mérez did not doubt that the followers of such a master, trained by him, would be worthy of him. Moreover, the reputation of the schools at Avignon and Marseille had reached him. He was quickly convinced that men who adopt the profession of teaching as a true vocation and who exercise it only through charity have an entirely different grace than others for instructing and educating the young, that there are none more capable and more virtuous than those systematically trained from their early years in a community which has made this task its principal aim, and that only such a community can furnish good teachers on a permanent basis in order to replace those who die or who can no longer serve.

With such ideas in mind, M. Mérez suggested that his bishop invite the Brothers of the Christian Schools into the diocese. The prelate

approved this idea and asked him to write to De La Salle. Here is his letter, dated 2 June 1707:

"I do not know, Monsieur, whether you will recall my name and whether you still remember me, but I have never forgotten you, and I remember very well having seen you at the Seminary of Saint Sulpice around 1671, when you were a canon of Reims. I have been informed that you gave up your canonry and dedicated yourself to all sorts of good works, among others to the founding of a community of schoolmasters who do a great deal of good wherever they are established.

"We need some of them here, where it is difficult for us to find Catholic teachers to whom we can entrust the education of the young. We need two right now at Alais. The problem is to root out heresy in this area and to establish the Catholic religion. It is an important task which calls for excellent workers. We shall have their expenses paid for by the people; thus your Brothers will not need to ask anything from the parents of the children. The salaries of the teachers are already provided by His Majesty; thus there will be nothing new about it. But we need to approach these Huguenots by showing them where their own interest lies and that these new teachers will make their children good penmen.

"I am appealing to you, Monsieur, for some of your followers. The Jesuit Père Beauchamp praises most highly those he has seen at work in Avignon and in Marseille, two very Catholic cities. The diocese of Alais is almost entirely Huguenot and so has a crying need for good workers to re-establish religion here through the education of the children. . . . Zealous as you are, I beg you to consider this part of the country, the corner of the kingdom where religion needs help most desperately, and I can assure you that we need schoolmasters more than any other kind of apostolic workers. We have men who can preach, but we lack catechists. . . . While awaiting the honor of your reply, I am, and so forth. . . ."

De La Salle experienced no little joy when he was offered an opportunity of satisfying his zeal for the extirpation of heresy, and his Brothers were called upon to combat it in the very places where it had taken refuge and where it had felt itself strong enough to insult the true religion and put Catholics to death. He was more convinced than anyone else of how important it was to have teachers capable of gradually liberating the children from the prejudices and errors in which they had been brought up and of combatting such mistakes early by teaching the contrary truths. He did not delay, therefore, in sending two Brothers, who started teaching in October of that same year, 1707. For their upkeep, the bishop of Alais obtained from the

king's piety the necessary funds. That is why the name Royal Schools was given to the institutions where the Brothers taught.

The bishop soon recognized what wise advice he had been given to invite the Brothers into his diocese. Delighted with their manner of teaching and himself a witness of the good they were doing, he wanted them alone to be in charge of the religious instruction of the young, and he forbade all other schoolteachers to teach religion. He aimed at having the Brothers' classes filled with the students from the other schools, and his wish was realized. Because this measure increased the number of students, he wanted more Brothers. He would have liked to see them in all the cities and larger towns of his diocese, as he himself says in the letter he wrote on 28 January 1708 asking De La Salle for more Brothers. Here is his letter:

"We have some of your schoolmasters here, Monsieur, and are very pleased with them. This leads me to wish that we could have more of them to place in the cities of the Cévennes and all the larger towns. If I had thirty of them, I could find work for them to do. They do a world of good. So as to maintain them in the spirit you have given them, I shall be careful to give them my best advice when necessary, and in addition, I will give you a faithful account of them.

"We need another Brother here for a second class. For the convenience of the people, we have to divide the one that we now have, which is too large. I feel sure that if we can spread the work done by your good and dear Brothers, it will become an infallible means of benefiting the families of our poor Catholic people. I send you, Monsieur, my best regards, hoping that you will lend us your help in evangelizing this unfortunate area which deserves the best efforts of your charitable zeal. You may be sure that I will not fail to aid the Brothers and that I shall watch affectionately over their interests on all occasions.

"I ask for your prayers and wish to assure you, Monsieur, that it is sincerely and with all my heart that I declare myself your very humble and very obedient servant. François, first bishop of Alais."

Delighted over the good results achieved by the Christian Schools in a region where heresy was so prevalent, De La Salle sent the extra Brother whom the zealous prelate had asked for, and he offered to send more if they were needed. So it is that the Lord, who takes care to measure out his consolations in proportion to the labors undertaken for his love, deigned to console his servant in the midst of his tribulations. The Brothers in Alais were not spared opposition on the part of the Calvinists; the spirit that animates the supposed reform is too rebellious and seditious to lay down its arms without a struggle.

The Huguenots did not dare to attack the new schools by force, but they tried their best to keep their children from attending them. The children had other teachers, public or secret, and it was impossible to entice them into the Christian Schools. Consequently, the establishment of the Brothers' school would have remained useless if the vigilant pastor who sought out the strayed sheep had not used the king's authority to proscribe all teachers of error.

He did even more. He called upon the same authority to oblige fathers and mothers, under pain of fines, to send their children to the catechism lessons taught by the Brothers on Sundays and feasts. They were constrained to obey, and attachment to the false religion gave way to pecuniary advantage, a not uncommon occurrence. In this way, the Christian Schools were filled with students, but at the start, the results were not very apparent. For if a large number of children attended the Brothers' instructions, they came mainly to cause trouble. Their numbers, instead of bringing joy to the Brothers, served only to increase their difficulties, because these children brought with them the heart and the spirit of their parents, spirit and heart in revolt against the instructions they were obliged to listen to. Fearing that these lessons might produce the intended effect, the parents, as soon as the children returned home, took care to counteract the impressions the lessons might have left on their souls.

The Brothers responded to such unyielding obstinacy with persevering zeal. Without becoming discouraged, they continued their teaching, presenting the remedy which their adversaries considered poison. The good bishop, whose own efforts met with similar opposition from these rebellious hearts, often visited the Brothers to comfort and encourage them, and he gave them the example of a charity which never allowed itself to be vanquished. The Brothers also found in M. de La Fond, a canon of the cathedral and their zealous spiritual director, a father who upheld them, encouraged them, protected them, and rendered them all the services which the most tender charity could inspire.

As I mentioned before, the king provided funds for the school at Alais from a tax on goods brought into the city, conformably to an edict of Louis XIV which Louis XV confirmed by a new decree in 1724. These edicts provided that in all the cities and towns of the Cévennes, schoolmasters and mistresses must be hired. They were to receive a salary of 150 livres a year, assigned to them by the king. In the city of Alais, the bishop, François Maurice de Sault, never tolerated any other schoolteachers but the Brothers; anyone else, Catholic or heretic, who ventured to teach children in secret was put into prison.

In spite of all the pleas made to him by important citizens, the bishop never authorized anyone to teach but the disciples of De La Salle.

In vain did the Huguenots contrive intrigue after intrigue to induce him to give in on this point. The bishop was inexorable, and secular teachers who did not wish to die of hunger were obliged to go elsewhere to make a living by their profession. He spurned all requests presented to him on this subject and threatened with prison those who dared to repeat them. To those who objected that the Brothers at Alais were not first-rate teachers of penmanship, he replied that he had not brought them in to make the children expert penmen but good Catholics. This zealous prelate continued to struggle, even to his last breath, against the vestiges of heresy that had taken refuge in his diocese; he never consented to leave the flock that Divine Providence had entrusted to him and that had such great need of his care, not even to go on to higher positions. He frequently preached during the celebration of the sacred mysteries in his cathedral and joined the example of virtue to the instructions he gave. His successor, who inherited his zeal, showed the Brothers the same protection and kindness.

## The foundation in Grenoble

It was in that same year, 1707, that the Brothers were invited to Grenoble in the following manner. Several clerics of outstanding piety had created a Christian society dedicated to the relief of the poor and the instruction of youth. With time, it came to include in its membership most of the distinguished inhabitants of the city and of the parliament, who all wished to take part in these good works. Their bishop, Ennemond Alleman de Montmartin, undertook the leadership of this movement, and all the members unanimously adopted certain rules of conduct which they bound themselves to observe. Christian humility having inspired them with a love for obedience, they chose a superior from their ranks and were entirely submissive to him. Whoever wished to be admitted to this illustrious body composed of the most notable citizens had to submit a request and remained among the postulants for a considerable time. When one of the associates died, they all attended a solemn funeral service for the repose of his soul, celebrated at the expense of the group. In addition, those who were priests said a number of Masses for the deceased, and those who were not priests had Masses said for the same intention.

These generous persons gathered on fixed days to determine measures to provide for the public weal. As ignorance and the lack of

education seemed to them to be the sources whence sprang the disorders prevalent among the poor, their zeal led them to seek a remedy for this in the establishment of Christian Schools. First of all, they had to provide for the living expenses of the teachers and then to select good ones. This they resolved to do in one of their meetings, where each person promised to contribute according to his means: twenty, twenty-five, or even fifty livres, and at death to leave invested a capital sum sufficient to perpetuate their donation.

As for the choice of the schoolmasters, Abbé de Saléon and Abbé Canel were asked to look into the matter. These two priests were men of rare merit. The first was at that time a canon of Saint André and has since been named bishop of Agen. Having studied at Saint Sulpice, he knew De La Salle well and was acquainted with the good work done by his Institute. He resolved to ask De La Salle for some of his disciples, and this he did during a trip he made to Paris about this time.

The second was also an alumnus of Saint Sulpice and by his virtue added luster to the institution where he had been educated, as well as to the parliament to which he belonged as its clerical adviser. He also visited Paris and repeated to De La Salle the request already made by De Saléon to send them two Brothers until a larger number would be needed. The deep regard that De La Salle felt for these two virtuous priests did not allow him to delay in responding to their petition. However, some fifteen months went by before things in Grenoble were ready for the arrival of the Brothers. When all the preparations had been concluded, Canel, who was commissioned by the devout confraternity to arrange for their coming, sent De La Salle the following letter, dated 30 August 1707:

"Some fifteen months ago, when I was in Paris, I had the honor of speaking with you, Monsieur, to inquire whether you could give us two Brothers from your Community to teach in a charitable school at Grenoble. You were kind enough to make me hope that you would cooperate with us. I think that the bishop of Gap, who remained in Paris after I left, also spoke to you about this matter. In the meantime, we have made everything ready for their lodging and upkeep.

"So I am asking you to send us two Brothers as soon as you can and to let us know what we need to provide them with, both for the journey and for their living expenses in Grenoble. We shall take the money for this from alms destined for various works of charity, for we consider this one, the schools, as among the most necessary. If you will take the trouble to inform me how much they need for the trip, I shall have the money paid to you in Paris without delay. I remain, Monsieur. . . ."

De La Salle received this letter with joy and also with some surprise because of the offer made to him. He immediately sent off the two Brothers he had destined for Grenoble. What surprised him was that the founders offered to defray the expenses of the Brothers' travel, something that nobody as yet had ever thought of doing in the other foundations he had made, even though it was proper that they should do so. It is true that he had not thought of mentioning this to the other founders, who no doubt would not have objected to such a reasonable suggestion. It was enough for the holy Founder to see God's will and his greater glory in an undertaking; after that, he forgot all the rest and abandoned himself to the care of Providence. A single example will suffice to illustrate how heavy a burden these travels of the Brothers constituted for such a poor Community. Once, when he had to send a Brother from Paris to Avignon, De La Salle gave him all the money in the house. The traveler was not oversupplied with funds, since all he got was twenty-eight livres.

Those who contributed the most to the foundation of which we are speaking and who showed extraordinary zeal for the Christian Schools were the president, Monsieur Bara; the grand provost; his brother, Monsieur Gelin, and their mother, Madame Vincent. M. de Montmartin, the bishop, also used his wealth to honor the Lord through this good work. He had even promised to add to his first donation a sum of 2,000 livres, but death, which overtook him during his last trip to Paris, allowed him only the merit of his good intention, not that of executing it. His successor, M. de Chaulnes, displayed a similar affection for the Brothers, and this he passed on, together with his dignity, to his successor, M. de Caulet, the present bishop of Grenoble. The latter, convinced that the Brothers have a special talent for instructing and educating youth, decided to put them in charge of the schools connected with the general hospice for the poor.

The Brothers' first school was opened in the parish of Saint Laurent. A few years later, it became necessary to open a second one, in the parish of Saint Hugues, to accommodate the overflow from the first school. Monsieur Didier, a canon of Saint Laurent, who also contributed to the founding of these schools, showed himself extremely devoted to the Brothers and took the place of De La Salle by concerning himself with fatherly affection about all their spiritual and temporal interests.

## Foundation at Saint-Denis-en-France

The following year, 1708, the holy Founder sent two Brothers to Saint-Denis-en-France at the request of Mademoiselle Poignant, who gave part of the endowment fund needed to provide for their living expenses, and at the urging of Père de L'Hostellerie, prior of the famous monastery of Saint-Denis. It was not without some reluctance that the holy man acceded to this request, for he did not especially like these little towns where two Brothers, left to themselves, are in danger of becoming dissatisfied. Also, he was becoming disillusioned with these small foundations that had to struggle so hard to subsist.

Because he could not turn down the pleas addressed to him and because he had reasons for thinking that the foundress would increase her initial donation, thanks to which it might be possible to add to the number of Brothers, De La Salle accepted the offer, somewhat against his better judgment. But Mademoiselle Poignant died without having had time to complete what she had started, and thus this establishment has remained up to the present in its original condition. It had been planned as early as 1705; in fact, that was one of the reasons why the zealous Superior had returned to Paris that year. The negotiations, however, were concluded only in 1708.

About that same time, the servant of God found the funds necessary to reopen his training college for country schoolmasters. He had never lost sight of that important institution nor given up hope of succeeding with it. He always thought that something would be lacking to his Institute or that the Institute would fall short of rendering to the Church all the services due to it as long as it did not prepare for country places, as well as for cities, pious teachers capable of giving young people the instruction and education needed for their salvation.

So he tried for a third time to set up a training college and bought a very fine house in Saint-Denis for the purpose. But that foundation became a source of new difficulties for him. The municipality opposed the project as soon as it became known. The parents of the donor filed suit against him, accusing him of having taken advantage of a minor. Dragged into court, he was condemned to forfeit the house and pay all costs; he was even obliged to flee. All the trouble happened in 1712, as we shall relate in a moment. Thus, for the third time, the project so dear to the holy priest's heart turned to his shame and confusion.

It is true that God does not always will that the most worthy designs which he inspires his servants to undertake should be carried out. Sometimes he decrees that these projects must be executed by

others. Père Barré had been the first to plan the establishment of training centers for schoolmasters, yet it was not he but De La Salle who was chosen by God to create this great work in the Church. The saintly Minim attempted it several times but in vain, because God had not selected him to be the one to accomplish it. Likewise, De La Salle set about founding a training college for country schoolmasters on three different occasions, and each time the project failed. Why? God's judgments are inscrutable, and it is not for us to inquire into them. Perhaps in his designs someone other than the Founder of the Brothers is to succeed in this work.

## Chapter VII

*In the new residence in Paris, God leaves De La Salle and his disciples a prey to poverty, yet he does not abandon them during the year 1709; since the famine is worse at Saint Yon, the Founder calls the novices to Paris; new crosses put his patience to the test.*

It seems that God took pleasure in granting to his servant as much suffering as he desired. Unceasingly, one cross followed another, and his life was nothing but a continual series of trials from the time he started concerning himself with the schoolmasters. His virtue, ever pressing forward, never had a chance to relax; Divine Providence had taken care to provide him with opportunities to exercise it. But the holy priest had found a place of repose in the new residence in Paris and was enjoying the solitude it offered. He found his solace in God after the many trying circumstances through which he had come.

This pleasant interlude did not last very long, however. The repose De Salle enjoyed would soon give way to perplexities and cares which the year 1709 would have made infinitely trying to any heart less steeled than his against adversity. In short, during a year when famine, joined to a long and rigorous winter, reduced so many to beggary, all the woes that follow such calamities besieged him in his poverty-stricken house, yet never did he seem so cheerful or so satisfied as when he was without bread or money or prospects of obtaining any. Then, lifted above himself and all the vicissitudes of life, superior to human fears and distrust, he put all his confidence in God and counted on God's Divine Providence.

After all, he had been accustomed for so long to endure all the afflictions which assail a person's life and which God uses to try great souls that by now he was inured against all that could happen, and he considered good fortune and evil with equanimity, since the one, like the other, disclosed to him the will of God and provided him with an opportunity for acquiring merit. Moreover, his long experience of such crosses had taught him that the more grievous they appear to nature, the more grace hastens to lighten them. He had received a thousand proofs of God's care for him and his disciples, and he was thoroughly persuaded that neither they nor he would lack what was needed, unless they lost confidence in their heavenly Father, who in his goodness provides for the needs of his children.

## Extreme suffering during the winter of 1709

Filled with such lofty sentiments, he remained at peace, and his repose in God deepened as his needs became more pressing. Not that he remained idle in the arms of Providence or failed to seek the assistance he required and which Providence sends, without external miracles, through the concourse of natural causes which it directs according to God's purposes and guides with infinite wisdom to God's own ends. He sought, and he found. Sometimes he found little enough, in truth, but it sufficed for men who knew how to be content with little and who, like Saint Paul, had taught their bodies through the constant practice of mortification and poverty to suffer—without murmuring and even with joy—hunger and thirst, heat and cold, the want of appropriate clothing, and all the other inconveniences of life.

Observing the family of this man of God, people might have thought that everything was plentiful in his house and that the winter and the famine which desolated all of France and everywhere laid low their victims had no right to exercise their rigor on the Brothers. Fervor alone warmed them in that protracted, bitter winter. In the dining room, they found only enough food to keep them from starving to death, but that was enough for them. They were satisfied, and no one thought of complaining.

How indeed could they have done so? They saw their saintly Superior at their head, displaying joy on his countenance and teaching them by his example to relish, even in the depths of their poverty, the heavenly manna which God had hidden there for them, seeking even in enforced fasting and abstinence the merit of voluntary penance. In addition, between them and him there was this difference: whereas each of them felt only his own personal privations and suffered only

in his own body, he not only shared with them the sacrifices imposed by the shortage of food and the extremely long and rigorous winter, but as their Superior, he felt in his heart the sufferings of all his subjects. They did not share the solicitude which was his of providing for their necessities.

The holy priest, the most disinterested man in the world, had accepted what people offered him for the various establishments of the Brothers. Since, as a rule, what was offered was barely sufficient to cover the simplest necessities in ordinary circumstances, it was far from adequate during times when food prices rose so high on account of public scarcity. Thus it was not only in Paris that the Brothers had to endure the rigor of hunger and the bitter winter; it was practically everywhere and in all their houses. Their father knew this, and his love for them made him wince at the thought of their hardships. He endured in his soul what each of them bore in his body. Those whom he had left at Saint Yon were the ones that worried him the most. They were a prey to abject poverty. They were forgotten or abandoned in an arid and harsh region which produced no more alms than food. They fell victims to the cold and famine and had only death to look forward to. Of all the holy Founder's disciples, these were the most to be pitied, because they lacked everything, even the hope of finding some help. They had indeed gone looking for assistance in the houses of the wealthy, the nobility, and the persons who were reputed to be charitable, but wherever they went, they met only rejection and harsh treatment.

Despairing of finding relief elsewhere, they had finally gone to the archbishop, as to their last resort, hoping that they would find in the prelate, who had just succeeded Archbishop Colbert, the same compassion the latter displayed toward the other paupers of the city. Unfortunately, Archbishop d'Aubigné was prejudiced against De La Salle and the Brothers. The Founder's enemy, who wielded such influence over the greatest prelates and entertained such close relationships with them, had succeeded in poisoning the new archbishop's mind against the servant of God and in giving him an unfavorable impression of the new Institute.

The archbishop of Rouen, although truly religious, zealous, and sincerely virtuous, showed at best an obvious indifference for the Founder and his Brothers. He thought he was doing a great favor to them by not ordering them out of his diocese. He would certainly never have called them in had he not found them there on his arrival. He tolerated them because his predecessor had admitted them. That was all his preconceptions allowed him to do. Furthermore, he forgot

about them and did not like either to see them or to hear them mentioned. Later on, we shall see what De La Salle himself had to put up with, even from such a saintly bishop who had been prejudiced against him. Given these dispositions, Archbishop d'Aubigné would hardly have received very graciously those who came to him asking for charity. The fact is that they left empty-handed.

## De La Salle brings the novices from Saint Yon to Paris

The vigilant Superior understood quite well that his disciples could expect nothing more in a city where people thought they were doing them a favor by allowing them to labor for the young. As we mentioned previously, the ten Brothers teaching in the Rouen schools were drawing a salary of only 600 livres from the Bureau which employed them, and after they paid the rent on their residence, they had less than 100 écus left. De La Salle had agreed to these terms, and he would not have been welcomed had he arrived asking for an increase in salary. When they had demanded that he supply ten Brothers, the members of the Bureau had obliged him to be satisfied with one-tenth of what was needed for them to live on.

While requiring the services of the Brothers, the Bureau had left it to him to provide for their subsistence. He did provide for it, in fact, as well as he could, and he found in the treasury of Divine Providence the reward for his disinterested charity. The Brothers at Saint Yon shared with those of Rouen, as they still do, the food that the heavenly Father sent them, as well as the vegetables from their garden, which is large but not very fertile. They have to water it with the sweat of their brow in order to force it to yield some return to them for their hard work. That was how these poor Brothers lived in Saint Yon at the time; they still live the same way. At that period, there were about thirty of them there. Ten taught in the Rouen schools, and the others were employed in the novitiate, in taking care of the boarders, and in the various departments of the house and garden. Like the Fathers of the desert, they lived by the work of their hands, being satisfied most of the time with bread, vegetables, and very weak beer.

At the time of which I speak, the Brothers had no endowment, no revenues. Their only resources were their work and the solicitude of their heavenly Father, which sufficed to allow them to live, almost without the help of any charitable donations from the people of a city where alms do not correspond with wealth. Between the Brothers in Rouen and those teaching in other cities, there was—and still is—this difference: the latter have regular income from endowments, whereas

the former do not; the latter's endowments provide them with revenue adequate to cover at least the bare necessities of life, while the former still have not found anyone powerful or generous enough to provide for their subsistence.

Thus the year 1709, with a considerable number of Brothers at Saint Yon and in Rouen, left them a prey to hunger, cold, and destitution. De La Salle was too concerned for their needs to forget or neglect them. But how could he provide for them? He himself, in Paris, and those there with him did not have all they required. To divide his slender resources with those in Rouen would have meant causing some to suffer hunger without really alleviating it for the others. Could he consider enlarging the family which was already at the mercy of the terrible times? If he increased the number of Brothers in Paris, it would have meant bringing them together to see them all starve. But on the other hand, how could he leave at Saint Yon those who were perishing of hunger?

After thinking the matter over carefully, De La Salle felt that he would be able to find more abundant resources for his Brothers in the capital, so he decided to call to Paris some of those in Rouen. Which ones should it be: the novices or the ten teaching Brothers? It was an agonizing choice. The Brothers, who were rendering a service to the public, were getting no help at all from the authorities. Charity forgot them while they were sacrificing themselves and wearing themselves out in its name. Mud, spittle, hoots, stones, and sometimes blows were the rewards given them for what they did. It would have been natural enough to call them away from serving people who seemed so unappreciative and to withdraw his Brothers from a place where they were so shabbily treated.

Anyone but De La Salle would have decided to do so. But he who had adopted the rule of contradicting nature in all things and of doing what was most perfect thought that God's greater glory required him not to close the Gratuitous Schools in Rouen and that he should be happy to further the interests of the poor children by sacrificing those of his family. After all, nobody had yet died of hunger, and the One whom they served in his members was powerful enough to help them and too merciful to abandon them.

De La Salle chose the novices. When they arrived in Paris, they increased the number of Brothers by over fifty percent. The residence, which was reasonably spacious for the Brothers in Paris, became too small to accommodate them and the new arrivals. There were about forty persons living there, which meant that they were in each other's way, day and night. They slept on wretched straw mattresses with

equally shabby coverlets and sheets of no better quality. Those mats were stretched out on the floor in an orderly manner in the various rooms, behind doors, and wherever there was some space available. Yet poor as this house of Providence was, it was open to anyone who wished to enter. The charity of the Superior did not shut the door to anyone who showed goodwill and who was not evidently driven to enter by starvation. Those of his disciples gifted with a less robust faith or a less generous charity than his took it amiss that their father should share with newcomers the bread which was often insufficient for them. However, a good many of the latter did not stay very long, preferring to leave after one or two months. De La Salle consoled himself for the loss and counseled those who reproached him with his too great readiness to admit postulants by saying wisely, *At least they made a good retreat which will be advantageous for their salvation.* Indeed, many postulants departed as they had come in. As they were asked for nothing when they arrived, neither did anyone ask them for anything when they left.

## Despite famine, De La Salle receives all who wish to enter

De La Salle counted on Divine Providence. Since our heavenly Father, whose title as Creator obliges him to take care of his creatures, does not find it more difficult to provide for a greater number than for a smaller one, the Founder did not worry about having to feed forty people every day. It did not even seem to bother him that everything was lacking in his house, a situation that recurred often, because God does not make miracles every day and is pleased to put to the test the patience of his faithful ones, as well as their confidence in him.

Those who hope in God do not always find everything they may need just at the very moment. If they never wanted for anything, abandonment to Providence would not be such a rare and heroic virtue; poverty would not put patience to the test, and the perfection of these two virtues, sublime and difficult as they are, would not be so hard to reach. There is, therefore, nothing to be wondered at if De La Salle's confidence in God did not shield him and his little flock from all the hardships of those calamitous times. Let it suffice to state that God never failed him in the end and that after having taken pleasure in letting him suffer for a time, God took pleasure in sending him timely assistance.

Here is an instance. All the provisions in the house were exhausted, as was also the charity of those who assisted the Brothers. The Brothers were without anything to eat, even bread, for the baker

who had been supplying it, not having been paid, refused to do so any longer. In this extremity, the man of God, as usual, had recourse to prayer. He did not take long to experience its effect, for the next morning, as he was going to say Mass, he met a person on whose charity it seemed he could no longer count. When this person asked him where he was going, he replied, *I am going to say Mass to ask God to give us what we need to live, for our community is without food and has no means of procuring any.* The questioner was touched by this and replied, *Go in peace; I shall see to it myself.* He kept his word and shortly thereafter brought ten écus to the Brothers, who were able to surmount their most pressing needs, thanks to this alms.

In cases such as this, when things were really difficult, the wise Superior took care to urge his Brothers by his burning words and his example of submission to have patience and to trust in God. He told them, "Fear nothing. God has never failed to help those who hope in him. Everything is granted to a lively faith and perfect trust, even miracles if they are needed. Jesus Christ has obliged himself to provide those who seek the kingdom of God and his justice with everything they need. Never has he refused it to those who serve him. Every page of Scripture bears witness to this truth. After all, nothing happens in this world save what God permits or ordains. Good and evil, poverty and wealth, come from his hand. It is he who distributes them with constant goodness and wisdom. If we have received so many benefits from his liberality, why should we refuse to accept from his justice the chastisement he sends us? He is the Lord; let him do what he pleases. If we conform our desires to his good pleasure, we shall find relief in our pains, put an end to our worries, and draw a treasure of merit from the depths of our poverty. Even if we have to die of hunger, if God finds us submissive, he will at least crown our virtue in heaven and admit us to the ranks of the martyrs of patience."

Thus joining his words to his example, the Founder confirmed his Brothers in their submission to God's orders. Though he showed so much concern for those with him, he did not forget those far away. His charity made him present in spirit everywhere that his body could not go and multiplied him in some way in all the localities where the Brothers were. He was as attentive to the spiritual and temporal needs of each of them as if he had only that one to take care of.

All the Brothers were suffering from the current calamities, and since they received from their endowments only enough to provide them with the simple necessities of life in ordinary times, they were caught up in the vast throng of the needy who lacked bread. Their tender father knew this, and it was no slight sorrow for him not to be

able to afford them any relief except through his prayers and letters. Unable to send them any other help, with what groans did he not offer his prayers to the heavenly Father, begging him to give them their daily bread and the grace to make a wise and holy use of their poverty. All the letters he wrote them stressed these two points. While consoling them, he tried to show them the spiritual riches the famine brought to those who seek these riches with the eyes of faith and the practice of patience.

God showed his concern for his servant and for his poverty-stricken followers, for although he left them in want, he always furnished them with the necessities which so many others lacked. At the end of this disastrous year, none of the Brothers' houses was in debt, whereas others among the wealthiest congregations found themselves burdened with heavy indebtedness. In Paris and in Rouen especially, Divine Providence showed itself more liberal toward the Brothers, because in those places they were in the direst need and deprived of all other resources. If in those cities God was glorified by finding miracles of virtue in De La Salle's confidence and in the Brothers' patience, we can also say that De La Salle and his followers beheld miracles of Providence in their houses on account of the unexpected help that came to them.

A relevant comment was made by a pious ecclesiastic whose house served as a charitable inn where the Brothers stopped when traveling between Paris and Rouen. How did it happen, he kept asking them, that your lives were spared in 1693 and 1709 when so many others lost theirs and that although you, like everyone, were engulfed in the famine, you did not end up being buried in the same tomb? Who were poorer than you, yet who in their poverty found more assistance than you did? How many paupers did not Divine Providence seem to have forgotten while remembering you alone? If you suffered hunger, at least it did not destroy you. Your Community is the poorest in the kingdom, yet it survived these cruel years which, it would seem, should have put an end to it. You have neither property nor income nor endowments, yet you survived a time when famine made itself felt, or at least was feared, in the wealthiest families. Many rich, well-endowed communities were ruined during those times or emerged from them laden with debts. As for you, you are just what you were before. If you have nothing, at least you owe no one anything, and your numbers increased during those days of woe.

## Scurvy enters the community

All that was true. Nevertheless, if God did not abandon his servant, he caused him to suffer greatly. It seems that he took pleasure in making of him a martyr of patience, for God put no limits to the intensity or to the duration of the trials with which he afflicted him. The end of one cross signaled the beginning of another. This we have seen in the entire history of his life, and we shall observe it again in what is to follow. The extreme poverty of the house occasioned the outbreak of a contagious disease. Six of the principal Brothers contracted scurvy, a malady as difficult to cure as it is easy to catch. The disease would have made great ravages in a group so tightly packed together, had the vigilant shepherd not immediately removed the sick ones from contact with those who were well. In that situation, De La Salle again showed himself active but untroubled, diligent but not disquieted. He isolated the disease and those who had fallen victim to it in an infirmary on the upper floor and assigned two charitable Brothers to care for them. He spared nothing to procure relief and healing for them. His charity on such occasions made him truly prodigal in a saintly way. But as much as he would have liked to procure a prompt cure for them, his poverty did not allow him to purchase the very expensive remedies for the illness.

There was at that time a distinguished doctor in Paris who had a reputation for curing scurvy, but while his treatment was effective, he sold it at a high price and demanded considerable fees for making the people suffer who put themselves into his hands. Where could De La Salle have found the money to pay a doctor who sold his services so dearly? At the same time, his fatherly tenderness could not endure to leave six of his children in the throes of such a dangerous malady without trying to help them.

## Praise for Doctor Helvétius

The famous Doctor Helvétius, then so popular in Paris, solved the problem for him. He had given the holy priest the information about the other doctor and had promised that he would ask him to show some charity to poor men who had no means of paying him. At this point in the story of De La Salle's life, we should certainly mention this celebrated Dutch physician. The holy Founder received from Doctor Helvétius all sorts of favors which were always given gratis. Helvétius esteemed De La Salle and rendered his Community all the services that the most disinterested charity could inspire him with.

Consultations, medicine, treatment, visits—all these the Brothers found free at his office, together with a generous welcome and a gracious smile. When they were ill in bed, he was kind enough to come to visit them, and when he did not have time to do so, something that happened often to the busiest practitioner in Paris, he sent in his stead another doctor who worked with him.

The one we are speaking of, contacted by Doctor Helvétius, kindly agreed to take care of the sick Brothers out of charity, following his friend's example, and he sent word to De La Salle to bring them to him. To do this more quickly and surely, the good father bundled them into two carriages which he had rented and went with them himself, in order to encourage them by his presence and comfort them by his words while they underwent the painful treatment which had to be administered and which was repeated several times on different days. The Brothers were cured, and all it cost them was the pain of the treatment and the thanks they humbly offered their benefactor. The doctor was satisfied with this payment, and his charity willingly overlooked their inability to pay. We can even say that out of respect for the holiness of De La Salle and out of admiration for the good his Institute was doing for the public, he completed the cure of the Brothers which he had begun out of consideration for Doctor Helvétius.

## A new cross to bear

No sooner had the man of God emerged from this trial than he was overtaken by another, more humiliating and embarrassing than the former, which came from one of his disciples. Similar ingratitude toward him on the part of his sons was nothing new. He had already found Absaloms and Judases in his own household. No matter how religious his Institute was, it could not be proof against temptation. Since sin was found in heaven itself, in the earthly paradise, and in the apostolic college, no one can be surprised if it worms its way even into the holiest communities.

No place can sanctify those who dwell in it; the dwellers must sanctify their dwelling place. No station is impervious to the devil's stratagems or to human malice. In all times, evil men have rubbed shoulders with the good. The first man found in his own family a sinner, like himself, who stained his hands with his brother's blood. Noah's ark, which saved the survivors of the human race from the universal deluge, preserved the life of one who was to repeople the earth with sinners and defile it with new crimes. The Church herself,

the holy and spotless Spouse of Christ, includes in her bosom both the just and the sinners, the elect along with the reprobate. There was, therefore, nothing surprising if in De La Salle's family there were to be found rebellious sons and disloyal disciples. God wished to put his virtue to all sorts of tests and to make use of all kinds of hands to strike him and shape him to heroic patience, the virtue which gives to the perfect the final traits of their resemblance to Jesus Christ.

The reader has not forgotten that in all the persecutions he had stirred up against the Founder, the aim of his great enemy was to deprive him of the government of his Institute so that he himself could take control through some protégé of his. To attain his end, he had tried the path of secret intrigue. He maneuvered behind the scenes without seeming to act himself, and in all the stratagems he devised to remove the holy priest from his house and to deprive him of his rightful office, he seemed to have in view nothing but the greater good, the honor of God, and the service of the Church. According to him, De La Salle was a virtuous man, but he did not have enough sense to rule the Brothers. Austere toward himself, the Founder was too strict on his disciples, who succumbed beneath the rigor of his yoke.

To give substance to these assertions and lend them a semblance of truth, he had blamed the Superior for the imprudence of a Director and of the Director of Novices, as we mentioned above. From all these clouds, he had fashioned a storm at the archdiocesan chancery, but after considerable noise, it had dissipated. Not having succeeded in attaining his purpose by attacks from without, the enemy had tried through his emissaries to stir up dissension from within. The result had been the loss of a few Brothers, but the blow had not fallen directly on the virtuous Superior. Despairing of realizing his design, he left the servant of God in peace. After a period of calm, the enemy now thought he had finally discovered the way to drive the Founder from his house and to take over the government of the Institute.

The man whom the devil found ready to carry out this plan was a religious of poor quality who had been in the Community five or six years. Whether he had never been really fervent or had lost his fervor, the fact was that he had grown disgruntled over the poor, humble, laborious, mortified, and retired life led by the Brothers. To secure more bodily satisfactions and to get back the right to do what he pleased, this Brother resolved to betray his master and to throw off the yoke of obedience. Having conceived this plan, the rebel looked for a way to carry it out. The only sure way seemed to be to attach himself to someone able to give him the right advice and to uphold him in his revolt. He could not have made a better choice than he did

of the very person who for seven or eight years had been plotting the same scheme and who, after vainly attempting to put it into execution so often, had finally let it go only because he had given up hope of ever succeeding.

It was to that person the Brother went. If the perfidious disciple did not use the identical terms that Judas did when speaking to the high priest and the princes of the Jews, what he said came close to the same thing. He described his own dissatisfaction over the frugal nourishment, the hard life, and the extreme poverty he had to put up with during several years in De La Salle's house. He let it be understood that he was tired and frustrated and that human nature could only succumb under such an intolerable burden. He did not fail to mention the number of postulants that De La Salle admitted, even though he did not have the means to support them, and added that it would be wiser to take in fewer subjects and to feed them a little better. He expressed surprise that De La Chétardie was letting the ten Brothers who taught in his parish schools die of hunger by turning over their salaries to De La Salle, who used the money to provide for the entire community. According to him, it was totally unjust to share with so many useless mouths the bread needed by those alone who worked and the food which they had earned. He concluded by saying that he was looking for a more agreeable lot and declared that he could get many of the other Brothers, in fact, nearly the entire community, to follow him if they were promised relief from their grinding poverty and given a more comfortable life.

Never did a discourse please the person to whom it was addressed more than this one did. He congratulated himself on his good fortune and began again to hope that through the perfidy of this unworthy follower, he would be able to gain the upper hand in the new community and through him to bring about what he had failed to do by his own authority. The bargain was soon struck, and measures were taken to detach all his disciples from De La Salle. The enemy of the servant of God promised to rent a house for the traitor and for those who would follow him, to see that they were well fed and taken care of, and to make him the Superior, after which the two of them would put into effect the changes they thought desirable.

If you are clever enough, he said to the rebel Brother, you will be able to win others over and create your own party in the community. Once that is done, I will undertake to convince the others, and thus De La Salle will be obliged to remain all by himself in his house. I will succeed infallibly in doing this, because of the salaries which the pastor of Saint Sulpice pays for the twelve Brothers employed in

the parish schools. I will have this money paid to you at the new house, for you and those who will follow you. The loss of the funds which De La Salle uses to provide for his community will mean the disappearance of most of his income and will leave in the direst destitution those who remain with him. Such destitution, which will be more protracted than that which you have recently experienced with him, will gradually detach from him men whom he cannot save from hunger. And if some of them are unwilling to give in, the example of the others will influence them, and we shall see them all come to our new house, where you and I will be in control.

It cannot be denied that these measures, so shrewd in their wickedness, were well thought out and that the scheme might have succeeded, at least to some extent, if God had not intervened to cause it to fail. In secret, the perfidious disciple set about winning over partisans. The first one to whom he broached the idea joined him, but if he was the first recruit, he was also the last. The evil did not go any further, for the Holy Spirit stifled it in its cradle by reproaching this accomplice with the enormity of his fault and by stinging his conscience with such cruel remorse that to appease it, he finally confessed the plot during the Chapter and before the entire community. He disclosed that a plan was afoot to drive De La Salle from the house or to entice the whole community into another residence under the authority of the rebel Brother. Surprised and indignant, all the Brothers felt a shiver of horror at the revelation. They found it difficult to suppress their resentment against the leader of the revolt, who had counted on making them follow him. The most moderate among them were the loudest in condemning the guilty person. With one voice, they wanted to expel this viper from their midst, since he was preparing to wound the community in the process of leaving it.

De La Salle alone remained calm, and by his meekness and charity, he tried to reconcile this new Absalom with the other Brothers. He wept over him as another David. Forgetting and disregarding the injury offered to himself, he seemed concerned only over the loss of the Brother and put all his charity to work to win him back. But it was no use. His crime was of the kind which, committed through pure malice and in cold blood, effectively seals up all the avenues leading to regret and right sentiments and which, in a sense, becomes unforgivable because its perpetrator does not want to repent.

The disgrace that the traitor felt when he was unmasked before the community did not permit him to pay attention to the salutary reflections which grace was suggesting to him through the lips of the man whom he had offended. He surrendered himself more and more

to the natural instability of his heart and stirred up more trouble in the house. Although the Brother was becoming a cause of scandal, De La Salle, full of pity for his unfortunate state, could not yet bring himself to amputate the gangrenous member. He hoped against hope that with time and patience, he might finally bring back his wandering sheep to the path of duty; fear of allowing a single soul confided to his care to perish prevented him from abandoning the unfortunate man. But the guilty one finally made up his mind to leave an Institute in which he felt everyone would thenceforth look upon him with horror. The scandal ended when he left, and the community returned to its usual calm.

## CHAPTER VIII

*Opening Gratuitous Schools in the cities of Versailles, Les Vans, Moulins, and Boulogne.*

The year of tribulation of which we have been speaking had not yet finished when a request came to send two Brothers to Versailles. M. Huchon, the parish priest in the city, sought assistance for the poor in his parish. It was not difficult for him to secure the resources and the protection needed for a foundation from Louis XIV who, as everyone knows, honored until his death that zealous pastor with his esteem and his confidence. The first Gratuitous Schools were opened in a building situated in the Parc aux Cerfs, and they achieved as much success in a short time as they had everywhere else.

The zealous Vincentian, delighted over the great good done by his school from its beginning, worked hard to consolidate the institution. The first thing it needed was a building of its own that was adapted for use as a school. Such a purchase did not seem too easy in a town where, because of the habitual residence of the king and the court, buildings are rarely put up for sale and usually bring very fancy prices. It was harder for him to locate a house than to gather the money needed to buy it.

However, he finally did discover one not far from the Parc aux Cerfs. He bought it at once and set aside an endowment to provide enough income to support the Brothers. A few years later, a schoolmaster who taught in an endowed school not far from the parish church passed away, and Huchon wanted to replace him by a Brother. On learning that De La Salle never sent a Brother alone, he asked

for two, so as not to break the rule. A fifth Brother to take care of temporal affairs was added sometime later to the other four, two of whom taught at the Parc aux Cerfs school and two at the school near the parish church.

After the death of Louis XIV, a building which had housed the minor seminary, located near the church, became vacant. The Brothers acquired the property, thanks to the charity and concern of the parish priest, who took steps to secure it for them. In this as in other matters, he did them a great service, for the building, convenient and isolated as it was, proved very well suited for the Brothers. Monsieur Le Bailly, the successor of Huchon as parish priest of Versailles, inherited his zeal for the Christian Schools and for those who teach in them. It can be said to his credit that the Brothers found in him the father that they thought they had lost when his predecessor died. They have been fortunate, too, in their relationships with the other priests in the Versailles parish community. The Lazarists, so devoted to the salvation of the poor and the ignorant, entertain a special affection for men whose vocation is to instruct the poor.

## A new disappointment for De La Salle in Versailles

Although that foundation, set up under the eyes of the king and the court, seemed off to such a good start and although it promised many advantages for the Institute, it almost became a serious danger to it. For a time, De La Salle thought that he would have the embarrassment of seeing such a well-located school fail and of beholding the same hand that had done so much to establish it become busy destroying it. Huchon had started the school, and it was he who threatened to wreck it. Why and how did such a change in attitude come about? We shall explain. If the reader is surprised at this turn of events, there will be even more surprise on learning its cause. What I shall say about it will be a lesson to the Brothers and a warning for those who encourage them to resist the assignments that their superiors want to give them.

The older of the Brothers who had opened the school at Versailles was an excellent Brother and a first-rate teacher. He had to a high degree all the talents needed in his vocation. His notable qualities soon won for him the affection of the parish priest, and the Brother was not slow in ingratiating himself into his good graces. What he planned was to make a nest for himself in a place which he liked and to find a friendly hand powerful enough to keep him there when the hand of his Superior might wish to withdraw him. Although

he succeeded in what he desired, it was to his misfortune, and he brought embarrassment to his protector.

Under the protection of the parish priest, this Brother began to take a bit more liberty than was proper. His companion, who was his inferior, either did not perceive his relaxed conduct or did not venture to admonish him for it. The atmosphere of the court, which the Brother not accustomed to it had begun to breathe at Versailles, inoculated him with the spirit of the world, a longing for a freer manner of living, and a desire to extend the circle of his acquaintances. He did so and began cultivating his contacts with them at the expense of his exercises of piety. Losing the spirit of retirement, recollection, and mortification, he also lost that of regularity; little by little, he fell into a disorderly way of life. He was ceasing to be a Brother and beginning to become a man of the world, one entirely taken up with external values, a superficial man with no concern for his interior life and no love for virtue.

De La Salle was warned of all this; he could see what was happening as soon as he set eyes on the Brother during the visitation he made of the Versailles school. The evil was still only at its beginning, so it should have been easy to remedy it. In fact, it would soon have been cured if De La Salle had been able to have his way. The Brother needed to be removed from Versailles, where the milieu was proving dangerous for him. If he had gone away to a place where a more healthy environment prevailed, he would have recovered his spiritual health. The wise Superior, convinced of this, was thinking of arranging a change. He even planned on making it at once, convinced that the ills of the soul, like the diseases of the body, are easy to cure at the beginning, but when through neglect they are allowed to develop, they become incurable with the passage of time.

## The pastor opposes changing the Brother

The Brother guessed his Superior's intention and took steps to forestall him. As he had lost the spirit of simplicity, he also lost that of docility. He was not at all inclined to leave a position of some distinction which flattered his vanity and fell in with the inclinations of his self-will. He turned to the parish priest to support him in his disobedience and informed him that De La Salle intended to remove him from Versailles. The zealous pastor, who considered the departure of this Brother as a loss for his parish, felt it was his duty to oppose the move. We can say that on this occasion, charity led him into error, for it was charity that persuaded him that he had a right to exempt the

Brother from obedience in order to keep such an outstanding schoolmaster for his flock.

It did not take the pastor long to recognize and to regret his mistake. By keeping the Brother in Versailles against De La Salle's wishes, he himself was working not to keep him but to lose him. Huchon received the Brother graciously and was grateful to him for the attachment he showed to the Versailles school. He told him not to worry, that he himself would oppose his transfer. He kept his word, unfortunately, and thus authorized an example of insubordination which he would have condemned as unacceptable and scandalous in his own Congregation of the Mission, since he was retaining an inferior against the orders of his superior or, rather, obliging a superior to conform to the will of his inferior. In fact, he sent word to the holy priest that if he took away this Brother, he should withdraw the other one as well.

Such an attitude caused the servant of God considerable affliction. He was surprised to hear such a statement from so virtuous a pastor, a priest who had been trained in religious obedience and was a member of a community in which the superior's will is law, where the choice of assignment is never left to the individual, and where any intrigue to remain in or to leave a given position is condemned. De La Salle feared what would happen to the Brother and bewailed in advance the loss of such an excellent subject; he considered such an outcome inevitable if the Brother remained at Versailles. Moreover, he feared the contagion of such bad example in his Institute, and with good reason. How can a Brother's disorderly conduct be remedied when he finds powerful protectors who authorize him to disregard his Superior's orders? The disaffection of the Brothers in Mende had no other origin, as we have seen, and the defection of the Brother in Versailles followed from the same principle.

De La Salle did not fail to call the problem to the attention of M. Huchon, but he was not listened to. The parish priest, who had in view nothing but the good of his parish, did not sufficiently consider where the best interests of the Brother himself lay, for he answered that he would take the responsibility for what might happen and would be able to ward off any evil consequences that might ensue. In saying that, he took on more than he was able to answer for, and he seemed to forget that his power really did not go all that far. De La Salle thus was forced to acquiesce. He felt that he should neither contradict a man determined to keep the Brother nor remove both Brothers and thus destroy the school he had just founded.

So the Brother remained in Versailles, as he wanted. What happened? Once the Rule, the wall that protects docile souls from what

threatens their salvation, was breached, it did not long defend him against the temptations and the other attacks of the evil spirit. He become more liberated than ever and by losing the grace of his state, he lost all attachment to it and to his vocation as well. So one fine morning, he packed his things, doffed the Brothers' robe, and went off.

The parish priest soon heard about the departure and sent after the Brother an elderly Vincentian who lived in the parish house. He caught up with the fugitive as he was leaving Versailles. This fervent priest, long practiced in the art of winning souls to God, tried to do everything to prevail over the Brother. All that zeal and charity can inspire, all that can touch a heart—prayers, reason—he invoked with all his might, but it all proved useless. Everything that had so often been found effective over the hearts of the greatest sinners remained fruitless insofar as this one was concerned. The priest learned by the event that those who have received much grace and abuse it become incorrigible and that whoever abandons his vocation often turns his back on his salvation.

The parish priest was more than surprised. He understood, but too late, how wrong he had been to oppose De La Salle's decision. He realized that he had counted too much on himself and on the Brother. But at least he made up for his fault and turned it to the advantage of the Institute, because having become wiser through this experience, he thereafter left the Brothers to the guidance of their Superior. Convinced as he was that the regularity of the Brothers depended partly on their numbers, he agreed to increase the number of Brothers in Versailles, as we mentioned above. From that time on, the Brothers remained a source of edification in a city which so sorely needed it, and the Christian Schools there continued to flourish.

## Foundation in Les Vans

The opening of the school at Versailles was followed by one in the city of Les Vans, belonging to the diocese of Uzès in Languedoc, in the Cévennes mountains, some six leagues from Alais. Les Vans is a tiny, little-known town, peopled almost entirely by Huguenots, where there is only one parish. We do not know why the founder of that school had such a special affection for the locality nor why he chose to favor the little town and endow it with a special means of salvation in preference to so many others in the region, alike infected with the virus of heresy. For he did not live there and had not even been born there. He did not belong to the diocese of Uzès but to that of Viviers. This benefactor was a virtuous priest, M. Vincent de Saint-Jean d'Elze

du Roure. Happening to pass through Avignon, he wished to see for himself if all the good he had heard about the schools there was true. His esteem for the Brothers of the Christian Schools having been confirmed by what he saw, he felt inspired to establish a similar school for the town of Les Vans. He did not want to leave Avignon without putting his good desire to execution through a testament drawn up in due form by a notary on 20 July 1708.

In the testament, after declaring that he wished to live and die in the faith of the holy, Catholic, apostolic, and Roman Church and to be buried with the simplicity proper to a poor priest, he made the Brothers the heirs of all his goods, charging them, as he put it, to instruct the youth of the town of Les Vans, to train them in piety, and to teach them the principles of the Catholic religion. I am persuaded, he added, that most of the children in the said city, through lack of proper education, become morally corrupt, and since they are born in heresy and have no knowledge or understanding of the Catholic religion, their ignorance is the fatal cause of their evil ways and the disorder in which they live.

If the legacy which he assigned to the Christian Schools was not very large, that was because his wealth was quite limited. The worthy priest gave much to God, since he gave all he had, disregarding his natural heirs, to each of whom he left five sols as a formality and to keep them from contesting his will. His zeal for the instruction of youth was displayed in the terms he used in encouraging the Brothers to fulfill well their glorious ministry. Nor did he omit to beg his relatives not to be offended if he preferred the interests of religion and those of the poor to their own and to beg the lord bishops of Uzès to further by their protection, authority, and support the execution of the foundation, useful and necessary as it was for the good of the Catholic religion and for the city of Les Vans, which had such urgent need of help because of the sad state into which it had fallen in regard to the faith. This short extract from the testament of such a worthy priest is a testimonial to his faith, piety, and zeal. It is a pity that all those who enjoy the same dignity do not show a similar spirit of religion and an equal virtue.

The testament was forwarded to De La Salle after the death of the pious ecclesiastic, which occurred two years later, on 19 September 1710, in the town of Aubenas in the diocese of Viviers. Its execution was not delayed. De La Salle's zeal urged him to implement it, following the intentions of the pious Founder, who on his deathbed had shown his unflagging interest in the school and who had taken further measures to insure its permanence.

## The foundation in Moulins

That same year, 1710, De La Salle sent two Brothers to Moulins, in Bourbonnais, to teach in the school there at the request of an excellent priest named M. Aubri, who had spent most of his life instructing the children of that city. Age and experience having taught him how important it is to bring up children properly, he felt that he could not find a better way to discharge that function, which he was no longer capable of carrying out, than by entrusting it to the disciples of De La Salle, whose remarkable reputation had reached him.

The influence Aubri had over the minds of his fellow citizens, his piety, and his long years of service helped to smooth out all the difficulties which anyone else might have encountered in having his decision accepted in the city. He spoke highly of the Brothers, and he was believed, because people were convinced that he, more than anyone else, was in a position to judge of their ability. On his recommendation, they were welcomed into the city. The people congratulated themselves on having done so when they saw for themselves that the good results surpassed the predictions he had made.

The school was inaugurated under the eyes of Abbé Languet, at that time vicar-general of Autun; he later became bishop of Soissons and today is archbishop of Sens. His zeal made him desire to witness the Brothers' manner of teaching. He was delighted with what he saw, especially with their method of teaching catechism. He ordered the older of the two Brothers to come to the parish church two or three times to give a demonstration lesson there before all the younger clerics and the other catechists of the city, whom he ordered to attend so that they might learn the Brothers' method and follow it. Brother did as he was told, although with reluctance, since it is not the custom in the Institute to teach catechism in church; this function the Brothers prefer to leave to the clergy, whose duty it is. The vicar-general was present at the head of the clergy whom he had ordered to attend. This mark of distinction on the part of a high official with outstanding merit did a great deal to enhance the standing of the Brothers. The classes in Moulins are now so well filled that the three Brothers, who teach approximately 300 pupils, are almost overwhelmed by the work load. It is to be hoped that God will inspire some charitable soul to complete what was begun and carried on so successfully by the zeal of the late Monsieur Aubri.

## The foundation at Boulogne

The foundation at Boulogne, dating from that same year, 1710, was the last one made by De La Salle himself. No other has known such success or has encountered more difficulties. It began under the auspices of Bishop Pierre de Langle, who favored it with his protection and helped it develop by his donations. For a fairly long time, it remained flourishing and at peace. Then it became involved in the troubles[14] that the new errors stirred up and subjected to that false zeal which combats everything that does not belong to its own party. Finally, seriously damaged by the efforts of its enemies, it came close to failing entirely.

The city of Boulogne owes the construction of the Gratuitous Schools to a saintly layman named Monsieur de La Cocherie, who in secular dress lived like a religious, observed celibacy, and devoted himself entirely to good works. His faith was as pure as his life. Unwaveringly devoted to the Roman Church, he was an intimate friend of the bishops as long as they did not adopt questionable views. He conceived a high idea of the Gratuitous Schools as soon as he heard of those who taught in them. The pious gentleman was led to found the school by M. Bernard, a priest of the Congregation of the Mission from the Boulogne seminary, who first spoke to him about it and suggested the idea to him. As he had already devoted the major part of his considerable wealth to other works of piety and no longer had enough money to defray the expense of this new enterprise, he was obliged to have recourse to his friends and to ask other like-minded persons to contribute to it along with him.

His bishop was one of the most enthusiastic in cooperating with his zeal. The sums required for the endowment were collected and invested in the hospice of the city. Four Brothers were called in. When they went to pay their respects to him, the bishop received them as graciously as he had those who, ten years earlier, had come from Calais to ask for his approval and blessing. He also gave new tokens of his kindness to this second group, and after he had greeted them and welcomed them to the city, he lodged them in his seminary while waiting for a house to be rented for them to live in. The house found for them in the lower town was small and inconvenient, and later on, it became necessary to look for another, better adapted to their requirements. Nevertheless, all six Brothers remained in the first residence for two or three years, for the bishop of Boulogne, encouraged

14. Jansenism.

by the example of the virtuous gentleman, also resolved to found a new school. For this reason, he asked for two more Brothers, whom he sent to teach in the upper town in order to make it easier for all the children to attend school. The second school was a big help and made the whole operation easier, because distance had made it difficult for the children who lived at the far end of the city to attend the first school.

As the first residence was so inconvenient, the founders felt obliged to change it. They obtained through the king's piety an empty lot in the lower town, and plans were drawn up to build. Work was started with enthusiasm, at the expense of the initial founders and of several other important people in the city who wished to take part in such a good work, but the construction soon lagged for want of sufficient building materials. The Marquis de Colembert, commandant of the city under the Duke d'Aumont, finally provided the material. He himself had drawn up the plan of the house and made it his business to see that the work was pursued. He soon had a good supply of building material brought in. He ordered the wagoners to haul some of their loads free of charge and urged the workingmen to lend a charitable hand. Because he encouraged the work by his presence, construction was continued at a brisk pace, and before long, the house was ready for occupancy by the Brothers.

As we related previously, when De La Salle was on his way to Calais, he stopped in Boulogne and was agreeably surprised to see the enthusiasm with which everyone hastened to lend a hand in the construction of the residence. He was even more surprised at the honor paid to him in this city. He was not accustomed to receiving such testimonials, since lack of appreciation was his usual lot. Furthermore, his humility did not allow him to imagine that the public entertained in his regard other sentiments than those which he himself felt or that they really wished to honor a man who thought it only just that he should be condemned to the most ignominious treatment.

In this the Founder was mistaken, as is the way with truly humble souls. The people in Boulogne thought of him far differently than he thought of himself. The high idea that they had of his virtue brought upon him the attention of the entire city. Everyone wished to see the venerable priest whose reputation had spread everywhere, thanks to the virtues of his followers. His humility suffered from all this. Everyone hastened to give him tokens of high regard, which he was alone in thinking he did not deserve. He began to grow weary of staying in a city which, unlike most others, paid him such notable honor. He would have wished to sidestep certain public gestures

without failing in Christian politeness, but there was no avoiding them. He had to appear and to come forward. He did so in his usual poverty-stricken garb, clothing so mean and worn that the Brothers had to take his old soutane away from him by force and oblige him to wear a new one which they had made for him in a hurry.

No one welcomed De La Salle more cordially than the saintly gentleman, De La Cocherie. He thought he was seeing an angel come down from heaven. He tried to get De La Salle to come to his house, in order to entertain him properly, but he soon regretted having offered a banquet to such a mortified and penitent man. He realized this on the very first occasion when, hoping to give a reception for the holy priest, he only succeeded in driving him away from his home. In fact, he could never again persuade the Founder to go there, as we have related elsewhere. De La Salle was wearied and out of sorts over these honors which his humility found unbearable. He therefore hastened to go elsewhere, seeking the ill treatment which he found so much to his liking.

When the holy Founder left Boulogne, he left the Brothers behind him to reap the fruits of his reputation and of their own. They were greatly esteemed there, and their work was applauded by the public. When the Bull *Unigenitus* appeared, however, its enemies became those of the Brothers and 1713, the year of its publication, was the beginning of a difficult period for the Brothers. At first, the Jansenists tried to win them over rather than to persecute them. They did not begin to harass them until their inflexible firmness showed how impossible it would be to win them over.

## Chapter IX

*De La Salle journeys to Provence to visit the Institute's establishments in that region; during his absence, an embarrassing situation arises over a house he had purchased in Saint-Denis for the training college for country schoolmasters; he does not defend himself and is condemned on the charge of taking advantage of a minor.*

The story of the life of the Founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools is so thickly strewn with crosses that we can scarcely conclude the account of one before starting the story of another. The one we must recount in this chapter outdid all the rest. Up to this time, the

holy priest had emerged from all his humiliations like the sun coming from behind a thick, dark cloud, his virtue more resplendent than ever. He enjoyed a spotless reputation which had never been besmirched before any tribunal. All the lawsuits filed against him by the writing masters had never touched his good name. In civil suits, he had been condemned to pay fines, but his enemies had never asked for anything more. They were not out to attack his honor but his schools. Their victory did not affect his reputation.

It can even be said that in spite of the intrigues of his enemies, he was honored as a great servant of God and regarded as a saint throughout Paris. Such consideration is flattering, and no matter how humble a man may be, his self-love may feed on it. Reputation is our most precious natural treasure, and it is often the only one that even the most virtuous men find difficult to renounce. Still, God's chosen ones are asked even this sacrifice. Such was the holocaust which De La Salle was next called upon to offer.

To explain what happened more clearly to the reader, we must go back to the beginning of the affair. I have before me the memorandum which, before he took to flight, De La Salle wrote about this entire episode in order to justify his conduct. I need only to summarize it; we cannot have a more faithful witness to the truth. If this document had been presented in court, as De La Salle expected it would be, thanks to the charity of those in whose hands he left it on his departure, the tribunal considering this case would not have issued against him a sentence so injurious to his memory.

## The origin of this serious attack on De La Salle

In December 1707, Monsieur Clément, Abbé of Saint Calais,[15] came to visit the Christian Schools in rue Princesse. After spending considerable time examining what went on and admiring the order which reigned there, he was eager to see De La Salle and asked the Brother to whom he spoke to conduct him to the house in rue Saint Honoré, where De La Salle had put himself in the hands of a surgeon to take care of a cyst which he had gotten on his knee through his assiduity in prayer.

The servant of God was quite surprised to see the young abbé who was brought in to him throw himself on his knees and earnestly

15. The young Clément was neither a priest—an abbé in that sense—nor an abbot, in the monastic sense, but he was eventually endowed with the title (and the revenues) of the Abbey of Saint Calais. To receive such a benefice, he must have been at least tonsured, and so, an ecclesiastic.

beg him to give him two Brothers to help him start a worthy enterprise which he had in mind. The abbé mentioned that he already had a large quantity of new clothes, enough to supply several young boys, between the ages of seven and twenty, whom he wished to bring up and who would be given a chance to learn a trade. They would also be taught whatever was suitable to their age and condition. This project was praiseworthy, but as the sequel would show, it was among those that Saint Paul calls *juvenilia desideria*, a young man's fancies against which one should be on guard. The holy priest replied that he could not give any help in the execution of this project if it ran counter to the normal scope of the Institute's work, but he did not further explain what was the normal aim of the Brothers' Institute. The young man's curiosity led him to ask for a memorandum on the subject, and in his charity, De La Salle wrote one out for him on the spot.

The abbé went off with this document, and after studying it for three days, he returned saying that he was not interested in the ordinary schools of the Brothers but that he liked the idea of training schoolmasters for country parishes. Thus his plan seemed to be to join the education of the young boys, previously mentioned, with the establishment of a training college for country schoolmasters. He wanted to combine the two projects in the same house. Thereafter he was quoted as saying that he wished to establish in the institution twenty scholarships for training schoolmasters for smaller villages.

Day after day, the young ecclesiastic showed fresh enthusiasm for the execution of his project. De La Salle was besieged and importuned to join forces with him and to advance the money for the undertaking, which he eventually did, turning over the requested sum to M. Louis Rogier, a friend of his in Paris and a person whom he trusted. Rogier was only supposed to lend his name to this transaction. He did lend it his name in all good faith, but later on, he betrayed De La Salle, his friend, or at least abandoned the cause of an innocent man. As the enthusiasm of the young M. Clément for the implementation of his scheme brooked no delay, he got his preceptor to help him urge De La Salle not to be so reticent over cooperating in the plan. The two of them came to see the Founder and renewed their importunities on the subject.

At first, perhaps, the servant of God did not take all this excitement too seriously, because in young people it disappears as quickly as it arises. Perhaps he wished to take time to consult others and to weigh the matter before God. At any rate, he seemed to hold back in proportion as Clément strained forward. As young people always tend to live in the future and to consider as already settled whatever they

desire, this young man was even then counting on the revenues of an abbey which had been promised him. In his pious enthusiasm, he determined to devote all that income to the furtherance of his project. In the meantime, he said, his father was giving him an allowance of 800 livres a year for pocket money. This he wished to use, with the exception of 100 francs, to promote his undertaking. At least, this is what he told De La Salle to win him over to the plan.

The servant of God did not give in easily. He wished to let time show him what he needed to do and to put the perseverance of the abbé to the test. His perseverance remained constant for a whole year. Two or three times a week, he came to visit De La Salle, begging him again and again to take up the matter. He wrote one letter after another to him on the same topic, but De La Salle did not let all this hurry him, and he never returned any of these visits.

## Persistence of young Abbé Clément

Abbé Clément never lost sight of his project. The earnestness with which he pursued its execution seemed inspired by God, because before getting started on the enterprise, he had submitted it to the judgment of his rightful superior, Cardinal de Noailles, archbishop of Paris. Unwilling, however, that his name should appear publicly, he asked De La Salle to go to the archbishop and speak to him or to his representative about the project in order to secure proper approbation. The abbé had thought of starting his new work in a building in the Faubourg Saint Antoine which belonged to M. Boyer, who lived in the Faubourg Saint Germain. He had frequently gone to see that gentleman to discuss the purchase, but before concluding the affair, he wished to get clearance from the archbishop. It was for that purpose that he asked De La Salle to go to the chancery.

Since this step was according to proper order, the holy priest accepted. He called on Abbé Vivant, the grand penitentiary at the hospital of the Quinze-Vingts,[16] where he preached every day during Lent, told him about the project, and asked him to approach the cardinal about it. When De La Salle went back for the answer, he learned that His Eminence did not think it a good idea to establish in Paris a training college for country schoolmasters and that he judged it more appropriate to put it in some village near the city. Sometime later, the grand penitentiary suggested to De La Salle that he set up the training college at Villers-en-Brie, four leagues from Paris, in a large house

16. The hospital, originally for the blind, housed 300 (15 times 20) patients, hence its name.

which the parish priest there had just bought. When the parish priest met De La Salle in the street at Saint-Denis, he urged him to accept his offer.

The servant of God informed the abbé of the proposition made to them, but it was not attractive to him, and he turned it down in spite of the remonstrances made to him by De La Salle. The reason he gave for his refusal was that the house was too far away and that he would not be able to go there often enough. He even wrote a rather strongly worded letter on the topic to the holy priest, who in pointing out to him the unfortunate consequences of his refusal, had warned him to be careful not to miss a good opportunity while pursuing one that might turn out to be bad. De La Salle went so far as to tell him that he was reluctant to get involved and feared to commit some false step in his company. The other understood very well what this meant, and he again wrote to De La Salle, in very forceful terms, to assure him that he would never go back on his word and that he would rather sell his shirt than not honor his word. And yet, he did fail to honor it, as the sequel would show. It was his bad faith, of which he became guilty under pressure from his father, which blackened the reputation of the servant of God in the eyes of those who do not get to the bottom of things. It was also about that time that the Brothers' school at Saint-Denis-en-France was opened, as we related above.

## De La Salle provides the down payment for the house

The abbé tried several times, in vain, to acquire the house of the priory by paying off the lease of the person who had rented it. He urged De La Salle to rent him the front section of the house belonging to Mademoiselle de Lage, which the Brothers were renting in part, so as to install there the training college for country schoolmasters which he dreamed of founding. The servant of God agreed, on condition that the cardinal would approve; he even wanted the prior to add his approval. They both gave their consent, but Mademoiselle de Lage refused to lease her house for the purpose. The abbé thus had to look elsewhere. After seeking for some time, he finally found a place suitable for what he had in mind, a house belonging to Mademoiselle Poignant, a sister of the woman who had endowed the Brothers' school. After looking it over several times and also bringing his preceptor, Monsieur Langoisseur, with him to inspect it, he finally decided to buy the house and agreed to pay 13,000 livres for it.

About a month after this agreement, the abbé, knowing that De La Salle was at Saint-Denis, went to see him with Louis Rogier, whom

he had brought along with him in his carriage. He informed the Founder that he had agreed on a price with Mademoiselle Poignant. He begged him to conclude the transaction without delay and to ask the prior to negotiate the terms of the sale while he and Rogier would negotiate with a certain nobleman who also had some claims over the property. They came back later and settled the matter with Père Célerier. A few days later, in October 1708, these gentlemen executed the contract of purchase with Mademoiselle Poignant. To make the down payment, the abbé urged De La Salle to give Rogier 4,000 livres. Shortly thereafter, he again urged the holy priest to advance to the same Rogier, who was lending his name to cover the transaction, another 1,200 livres. That sum was in the hands of the notary, M. Le Mercier. Like the earlier sum, it had been donated to De La Salle for the needs of his Community and especially to contribute to the establishment of a training college for country schoolmasters, directed by the Brothers.

I do not know what made De La Salle suggest to Abbé Clément, after he had bought the house at Saint-Denis, to join with Monsieur Desplaces, who was educating a number of ecclesiastics in his residence. Perhaps he gave him to hope that he would find in that group men capable of directing both the training college and the children whose training was his first interest. The abbé followed this advice and was charmed with Desplaces when he went to visit him. They did join forces. After drawing up a plan for the manner of bringing up these young boys, they wrote out a memorandum which they submitted to the cardinal, who approved it. Thereafter, in the abbé's mind, the two projects—the training college for country schoolmasters and the house to train young boys—were two separate entities.

Some time after the purchase of the house at Saint-Denis with De La Salle's money, the abbé wanted to give him a receipt for the 5,200 livres which had served as the down payment, since Rogier, the legal purchaser, had refused to give such a receipt. This receipt remained, however, in Rogier's hands. Only when the abbé began to have second thoughts did Rogier turn it over to De La Salle, in order to testify to the fact that he had indeed furnished the sum of 5,200 livres, the down payment on the purchase price of the house acquired at Saint-Denis under Rogier's name.

## The cardinal favors the project of Abbé Clément

As soon as the abbé bought the house, he ordered the bailiff of the abbey to vacate the premises, and he gave himself no rest until the

Brothers took over the place. They did so at Easter of the following year, 1709. Not long afterward, they welcomed three young men, the first candidates for the training college. On Sundays and feasts, they attended services in the parish church of Saint Marcel in surplice and soutane. They remained in the house until the high cost of food made it necessary to send them home, but they were told that when times improved, they would be called back. To lighten the burden on that institution, the cardinal obtained from the Duke de Maine a written exemption from the obligation to quarter soldiers. The document was dated the same year, 1709, and mentioned that the favor was granted by order of the king. It also specified that the house was to be the residence of three Brothers, one of whom was to teach Gregorian chant. The purpose of this notation was to show that the premises were supposed to be used by the Brothers for the training of country schoolmasters.

The sale had barely been concluded when Mademoiselle Poignant wanted to get the house back. She offered to refund the money, but the abbé refused. Nor did he wish to entertain Rogier's proposal to resell the house when a buyer presented himself. Finally, sometime later, M. Clément, the father, learned of the acquisition made by his son under the name of a third party. He resolved to invoke his son's status as a minor to have the contract annulled. But the son, whose conscience did not allow him to be part of such a fraud, told his father firmly that he would never make use of his age to cause any damage to anyone.

Things were at this point when De La Salle undertook to visit the establishments of his Institute in Provence, Languedoc, and other distant places. Not that he lacked precise information about what was going on there, since the regulations he had established among the Brothers and the accounting which they made to him about all that the Rule prescribes did not allow the Superior to be ignorant of what was done, even in the most distant houses. But he had not yet seen all those schools, and he was anxious to learn from personal contact how things were going.

He left Paris on this journey in February 1711. He was received with joy by the Brothers and with honor by the bishops of the localities where the Christian Schools had been established, when he went to pay his respects to them. He observed with great satisfaction all the blessings the Lord was giving to the work of his disciples, but he did not have long to enjoy his visits. Letters from Paris called him back there to defend the acquisition made at Saint-Denis.

## The father of the young Clément initiates a criminal and civil suit

The affair was serious: De La Salle's interests and honor were at stake. The purchase of the house in question was being challenged. It was claimed that he had bought it at the expense of a minor. De La Salle was accused of having taken unfair advantage of the young man, and because of all this, he was being sued in civil and criminal court. He had no choice, therefore, but to return, not to engage in a lawsuit—for he was firmly resolved not to plead and to yield rather than go to court—but to find out what the case was all about and what he was being accused of. Upon his return, he called on his opponents, but he found them unwilling to discuss the matter. They were deaf to reason and turned down all suggestions for settling the matter amicably. In their view, he was an impostor, a deceiver who had taken advantage of a minor, misled him, and defrauded him. They insisted that he must be declared such by a legal sentence; he must be condemned to all the penalties that justice levies against such offenses. In vain would De La Salle have offered to the elder Clément the house bought partly with his own money, for that man counted on getting it anyway through the sentence of the court. Even that was not enough to satisfy him. He wanted the holy man to pay by forfeiting his honor and his liberty, not so much for the fault as for the enthusiasm of his own son.

Personal condemnations and prison itself were awaiting De La Salle. I do not know whether his adversaries would have hesitated to demand that he be executed, dragged from jail to the gallows. Yet, what had he actually done? He had finally yielded to the importunities of Abbé Clément, who had pestered him for a whole year to join with him in starting a good work. He had given the young man 5,200 livres to use as a down payment on the purchase of the house which he had bought. Such was De La Salle's crime.

What is incomprehensible is how a twenty-two- or twenty-three-year-old ecclesiastic could agree to join forces with his father and declare himself the adversary of De La Salle in a petition so injurious to the reputation of the holy man, presented in both his and his father's name to the civil lieutenant. From the extract which we have given of the memorandum that the servant of God drew up in his defense, it appears that the abbé had acted in complete good faith with De La Salle and that he was intelligent, had good taste and good sense, possessed a basic piety, or at least showed some signs of it. He had not acted inconsiderately but had taken proper measures and precautions; he had asked for the advice and the approval of his superiors. He had

undertaken nothing without the archbishop's consent. His preceptor was aware of his transactions and was the confidant of his projects.

## Abbé Clément's irresponsible conduct

Certainly, the son could have opposed the fury of his father by pointing out to him that every age is appropriate for doing good works and that no law forbids a minor who is an ecclesiastic to engage in them, so long as he causes no harm to anyone and does not burden anyone else's property. He was twenty-three years old and had not so very long to wait before attaining his majority. He intended, as soon as he reached the legal age, to ratify the acquisition made during his minority. He owed this ratification to his conscience, to charity, justice, good faith, and his pledged word. He could not, without betraying all the rules of equity, summon before the bar a man whom he had begged during an entire year to join him in the project.

If anyone was at fault in the purchase of the house in question, it was he himself, since nothing was truer than that he was the one who had purchased it. He had not done anything in the affair that his archbishop had not approved of. The purchase of the house did not in any way benefit De La Salle. Those who stood to gain from it were the country parishes which would secure therefrom capable and well-trained schoolmasters.

De La Salle had indeed furnished 5,200 livres to make the down payment on the house. The young man could have said to his father that if the purchase displeased him, it would be easy to resell the house and let everything return to its former condition, without making such a fuss and provoking so much scandal. But the fact was that those people wished to ruin the holy man, and the abbé, whether deceived or deceiving, went along with them. He was either very weak or very clever. In any case, he acted irresponsibly, and he permitted the servant of God to be forced to answer for a transaction in which he himself had involved the Founder much against his will.

It is believed that the secret enemy of De La Salle had a finger in the affair and did his best to fan the flames instead of quenching them. For a long time, he had wanted to see De La Salle far away from Paris so that he could profit by his absence to take over the government of the Institute. If that was so, as we now have every reason to believe and as De La Salle himself was persuaded, his enemy finally had his way. The servant of God withdrew from Paris, and his adversary, taking advantage of his absence, invaded his flock and undertook to govern it as he wished, as the sequel will show.

## De La Salle prepares a written defense

We have already mentioned how deeply the man of God detested lawsuits. However injurious and defamatory was the petition filed against him, however gross and false the accusations hurled at him, however well founded were his rights in the matter of the house, he preferred to give in, following the advice of the Gospel, rather than to appear in court to carry on a lawsuit. Nevertheless, in order not to be open to the reproach of having abandoned God's cause and of allowing it to be shamefully betrayed by the one who was the real author of the whole undertaking or without opening his mouth to defend himself, De La Salle entrusted to several persons enjoying influence and authority a number of documents, a memorandum, and thirteen letters from the abbé to justify his conduct. He asked them in their charity to see to it that justice was done him.

It has always been believed that what these persons did was to send these papers to be examined by some lawyers who were connected with the opponents of the servant of God. For in the report they drew up and forwarded to those who had consulted them, they gave their opinions, not like advocates but like declared enemies of De La Salle. The outcome of this consultation was entirely in conformity with the petition presented to the civil lieutenant.

When this report was sent to De La Salle, he was indeed amazed at finding adversaries where he had hoped to find friends and defenders. He therefore concluded that his only safety lay in flight and that he would vainly attempt to justify himself, since his condemnation was a foregone conclusion. Whatever he might say, he would be held to be in the wrong; people did not want to find him innocent. They had come to believe their own prejudices and would listen to nothing else. They thought him guilty because they wanted him to be guilty.

Faced with these attitudes in his regard, De La Salle decided to let them have their way and to abandon to them his house, his honor, and his reputation by withdrawing his person from their pursuits. This resolve had not yet been executed when Rogier, who had lent his name for the purchase of the house, came to tell De La Salle that he had been condemned, that the house had been confiscated, that a warrant was out for his arrest, and that he should take whatever precautions he felt necessary to insure his safety.

## The harsh judgment against De La Salle

The servant of God, surprised at such a rapid judgment, was even more amazed that his case had been abandoned by the persons whose protection he had implored. It is certain that if they had wished to appear and take in hand the cause of the saintly priest, they could have spared him this blow. Their influence would at least have shielded him from disgrace, if it could not win for him a favorable judgment. Rogier, who was certainly as much implicated in the affair as De La Salle was, if not more so, and who enjoyed neither influence nor authority, was able to obtain justice for himself. When Rogier saw that the house had been confiscated or was on the point of being lost for De La Salle, he intervened in his own name in the lawsuit, stated that he, too, had an interest in the case, and demanded the restitution of the 5,200 livres which he had put down as the initial payment. That same amount was awarded him, and when the house was sold, he was reimbursed for what he had spent, and the rest was confiscated. De La Salle would not have been in a worse position than he, and similar justice could not have been denied him had he not remained undefended.

Was it due to malice or to negligence that those whom he had chosen as his defenders abandoned him to such unjust treatment? It is not for us to judge, but it is a fact that their minds, too, were made up in advance and that they were in contact with the one who wished to get the servant of God away from Paris. Why, then, we may ask, did De La Salle place in their hands the documents which would have established his innocence? It was because he lacked all other help and support; he had no one else who might be willing to speak for him.

He hoped that prejudice might yield to charity on this occasion and that such worthy men—for the persons whose assistance he had requested were indeed worthy—would set aside all human views to uphold the cause of God. They would have done so on any other occasion, but in the case of a man whom God wished to crucify in all things, the Lord permitted that nobody should take up his defense and that he should be left in the hands of human justice, just as Jesus Christ was in the hands of Pilate, in universal oppression and complete abandonment.

Rogier himself, De La Salle's close friend, was guilty on this occasion by separating his interests from those of the servant of God, although they were closely connected. It would have been easy for him, while vindicating his own rights, to do the same for those of his friend, whose honor and reputation he would have saved as easily as

he saved his own. But God did not permit that to happen, since he willed to add a new mortification to so many others.

## The heroic patience of De La Salle

Only his virtue afforded De La Salle any relief in the midst of so many tribulations. Accepting them from God's hands, like Job, he blessed God, who was their true author and who disposes of all the happenings of life according to his ends. The holy man uttered neither complaints nor murmurs against all the various persons who seemed to have leagued themselves to oppress him. Silence and patience, his ordinary weapons in the trials of life, were the only ones he used against the abbé's bad faith, the father's anger, the ill will of the lawyers, the inertia of his protectors, and the betrayal by his friend.

Considering himself in Paris as though in enemy territory and seeing everywhere only secret or open persecutors and cowardly or perfidious friends, De La Salle left the city the day following his condemnation, during the first week of Lent in 1712, to escape from the ultimate excesses of the persecution, in accordance with the advice of Jesus Christ, *When they persecute you in one city, flee to another*. De La Salle buried himself far away in Provence. He did not return to Paris until he could do so in safety, that is, when his secret and implacable persecutor who had stirred up all the other adversaries could no longer do him any harm.

After the departure of the holy man, the Brothers received two summonses: one from Rogier, who had gone over to the other side, although he had been his intimate friend, and the other from M. Clément, the father. In both of these documents, De La Salle was treated with extreme discourtesy. In particular, they made it a point to call him *a priest of the diocese of Reims* and s*uperior of the Brothers of the said house*, not Superior of the Brothers of Paris and Saint-Denis. All these expressions revealed the evident collusion between his legal adversaries and his great enemy. The man who for ten years had been striving to take away from the Founder the government of the Institute he had created and whose only purpose was to force him to go back to Reims with the Brothers there, so that he himself could take over the control of those in Paris, revealed his intentions by such statements and showed clearly that it was he who had once again pulled all the strings in this latest persecution. He finally succeeded in his design and triumphed over the servant of God.

## De La Salle misunderstands the Brothers in Paris

What affected the Founder most keenly was that he imagined that all the Brothers in Paris were on his enemy's side. It was a false impression, because during his absence, the Brothers in Paris remained in his regard what they had been when he was present among them: obedient and inviolably attached to his person. What gave him this impression was the fact that Brother Barthélemy, thinking that it was the correct thing to do, had forwarded to him the two summonses in which the holy Founder was addressed as superior of the Brothers in Reims and not in Paris.

Such terms, which could have been dictated only by his rival, made him wonder about the fidelity of his disciples in Paris and fear that they might already have given in to the intrigues of his enemy. For he said to himself, why send me these documents couched in such terms, if not to hint that they no longer consider me as their Superior? His suspicion was ill founded. Brother Barthélemy had sent him the papers in all straightforwardness, thinking that he should let him know what was going on in his absence.

The Founder, thus misled, did what he usually did, that is, he gave way, humbled himself, and abandoned to their own direction those who seemed to be rejecting his control, even as he had done with regard to the Brothers in Mende. In consequence of this mistake, he no longer wished to correspond with Brother Barthélemy, who, he thought, had gone over to his adversary's party and who wished to receive his letters only to betray him under this appearance of confidence. Unfortunately, Brother Barthélemy could not exercise any authority as Superior, because De La Salle had not appointed him his substitute in his absence and because he had not been chosen as Superior by the other Brothers.

The devil did not fail to turn to his own advantage this misunderstanding and to make it a source of harm for the Institute. The Brothers in the provinces who left the path of duty no longer feared any correction; they therefore grew bolder and bolder and threw off the yoke of the Rule. De La Salle, buried far away in the most distant provinces, let no one know where he was. Meanwhile, Brother Barthélemy had no right to replace him or to make use of the Founder's authority. Consequently, those among the Brothers who were not the most fervent, who were no longer giving an account of their conduct and no longer receiving from a Superior either advice or orders that might have brought them back to their duty, took more and more liberties and gradually lost the spirit and grace of their state.

The evil went much farther than it had in 1702 and came close to ruining the Institute. That was what the devil sought by stirring up around the holy Founder so many persecutions which upset the Brothers and weakened their fervor. If the work had been man's work, he would have succeeded. God allowed all the trials, however, only to strengthen the Community and to rid it of unworthy members. In this way, he brought the Institute back to its first condition and gave it back its early fervor when the holy Founder returned. It was this which was the true result of that great persecution.

De La Salle had been deceived by a minor, abandoned by those whom he had chosen for his defenders, betrayed by his friend, and oppressed by his enemies. The victim of his own good faith, the object of the jealousy of a powerful rival, calumniated, accused, condemned as an impostor and suborner, he saw his own property handed over to the person who accused him of fraudulently obtaining it. He saw his good name besmirched because he had undertaken a good work for which he had laid down his money and his name. For the third time, he saw the failure of the projected training college for country schoolmasters, which had been off to such a good start.

Critics and those who never want to make any allowances for devout men will no doubt blame De La Salle for imprudence in doing business with a minor and for not being on his guard, but his involvement was for a good work. Is a minor forbidden to devote to such an undertaking his ecclesiastical revenues and the economies he may make on his personal allowance? Had the abbé not obtained the archbishop's consent for his project? Did it make much sense for him to claim, at the age of twenty-four, that he had been duped? Could not De La Salle have trusted a young man who for an entire year had repeatedly importuned him to join him in the proposed foundation?

It is not to be wondered at if this young abbé, who was responsible for all the disasters we have just described, came to an evil end. After the death of the regent,[17] he was accused of plotting against the state and was exiled, in chains, far from Paris. As for Rogier, he recognized his wrongdoing and tried to make up for it as well as he could. I say as well as he could, because while he could not undo the harm done to the good name of the servant of God, at least he was able to compensate De La Salle for the loss of the 5,200 livres which he had occasioned. In his will, he left him an annuity of 360 livres to be paid him after the death of Rogier's maidservant, adding that he did this *for reasons of conscience*.

17. Philippe II of Orléans, regent after the death in 1715 of Louis XIV until his own death in 1723.

Never did a legacy turn up at a more opportune moment for the holy man, who by that time had returned from Provence. God made it plain by the arrangements of his Divine Providence that he had inspired the legacy to compensate De La Salle for his loss and to give him the means of finally securing a fixed headquarters for his Institute, where the novitiate would be adequately installed. The maidservant, who was to draw the legacy first, did not long survive her master, and when she died at the age of fifty, she left this annuity to De La Salle, who was over sixty-six. At his request, the holy man was given the capital instead of the annuity and used the money to acquire the property of Saint Yon. But all those transactions happened only several years later, after his return from Provence, where we shall now follow him.

## Chapter X

*De La Salle flees to Provence, where he finds new crosses to bear; en route, he is celebrated with honor, and everyone smiles on him in the cities as he passes through; local clerics involved in the doctrinal split seek to win him over; his new novitiate fails because he will not subscribe to the current opinions; he plans to go to Rome but abandons the idea in a spirit of obedience; finally, he is forced to go into solitude.*

It was not to seek repose that the holy Founder departed to the most distant provinces. The cross followed him everywhere, and vainly would he have sought to avoid it. When he changed his residence by going from Paris to Provence, he merely exchanged crosses. At first, his journey was agreeable enough. He was welcomed by the Brothers on the way like a father whose children love him tenderly. They all wept and tried to comfort him in his affliction, which they shared with him most sincerely.

If at first they were surprised to see him, they were much consoled by his visit and vied with one another in showing him their confidence and attachment. The reason for his departure from Paris was for them a cause of tears, and many did they shed over him while seeking to dry his. More sensitive than he to the wrongs he had suffered, they needed all their virtue to stifle in their bosoms their complaints and outcries against those who were responsible for the way he had been treated. If some expression of indignation escaped them,

the holy Founder, far from approving or even listening to it, exhorted them to adore God's will as he himself did and to consider nothing but God's orders in all the happenings of life. He invited them to join him in praying for his persecutors, so as to fulfill the precept given us by Jesus Christ and to follow his example.

## De La Salle is received with honor everywhere

He reached Avignon toward the end of Lent, 1712. The Brothers there, delighted as were all the others over having their Superior with them, kept him with them as long as they could. He was preparing to make a visitation of all the establishments the Brothers had in the area. His plan caused the Brothers considerable alarm, because it was dangerous to venture too far out in the country because of the Camisards,[18] who occupied the countryside and waged a cruel war on all ecclesiastics. It was well known that their great delight was to sacrifice priests to their fury and to satisfy their hatred of Catholics by shedding the blood of the Lord's ministers. Vainly did the Brothers point out to De La Salle that he should not endanger himself to being hunted down by the rabid fanatics whose external aspect alone showed them to be human and who, under the semblance of men, bore the hearts of wild beasts. But nothing could discourage his zeal. However, with the help of Divine Providence, his trip from Avignon to Alais was accomplished safely and without incident.

The eagerness of the Brothers to welcome their Superior was imitated by a large number of persons who knew De La Salle only by reputation. They sought to pay him honor because of the zeal and diligence that his disciples displayed for the instruction of youth. No one showed him greater consideration than the bishop of Alais, when he went to present his respects. The prelate could not find marks of distinction adequate to honor a priest whom he held in such esteem. Among all the graceful compliments paid by the pious bishop to the holy priest, nothing gave him more joy than the way he praised the Brothers for their diligence in converting the children of the heretics. Ever since the Brothers had taken charge of instructing them, many had embraced the faith. As the salvation of souls was the sole object of the Founder's efforts, it was also the one thing that gave him joy.

After remaining at Alais for a few days, he proceeded to the little town of Les Vans, passing through the parish of Gravières, which is

18. A militant band of Huguenots. The name is derived from the distinctive shirts they wore.

not far from there. He was welcomed like an angel from heaven, and in spite of his objections, he was obliged to spend a few days with the prior, a great friend of the pious priest, who had founded the school at Les Vans and had been asked to take charge of the spiritual direction of the Brothers. The worthy ecclesiastic paid too much honor to the humble Founder, and he gave him too many tokens of the profound veneration he entertained for his person and of the high esteem he had for his virtue for De La Salle to enjoy his stay with him. The virtuous prior carried this respect to the point of reserving for himself the privilege of serving, in his surplice, the Mass of the pious priest. De La Salle felt confused over this special attention but could not prevent it.

It was a joy for the prior when he saw the holy Founder in his house, and he did all he could to have him come back. If he had kept his pious desires better hidden in his heart, he would have had the joy of satisfying them longer and more often, but by doing so much honor to a man who avoided recognition, he instead forced him to avoid his house. In fact, the servant of God found excuses to stay away from Gravières as much as possible in order to avoid all these marks of distinction which he found so distasteful. That was why he resolved to take another road when he went through that area again.

From Gravières he went to Les Vans and gave the Brothers there an agreeable surprise, for they had not expected to see the Superior in their part of the country. They considered his visit providential. The joy of the father and of his children was reciprocal, because on his side, he was delighted to see with what patience these good Brothers labored to instruct the children of heretical parents. After exhorting the Brothers to persevere, he left them a few days later and went to Mende.

That part of the journey was dangerous and difficult for him. He risked his life more than once on the way through the rugged mountains of the Gévaudan with their treacherous precipices. He endured bitter and stinging cold, and by the time he arrived in Mende, his health had suffered. Still, as he was not a man who paid much attention to his aches and pains, after a few days of rest, he began his visits by calling on the bishop, who entertained a singular esteem for him and gave him all possible tokens of it. The prelate told him everything in praise of the Brothers that was most agreeable to him. He begged De La Salle to remain and to dine with him, but the servant of God, who in order to avoid this sort of honor always found a ready excuse in the customs of his Community, asked the prelate to allow him to give the Brothers an example of fidelity to the Rule

which he had prescribed for them. The bishop of Mende, edified by his modesty, preferred to accept his excuse rather than to interfere with his strict regularity.

Everyone in the city wished to meet the Founder of the Brothers. This attention brought him a large number of visits, which took up all his time, for those who came to see him could not tear themselves away, so charmed were they by the gentleness of his words and by the aura of holiness surrounding his person. Because they never grew tired of seeing him or listening to him, he decided to leave as soon as possible without making any announcement and without saying good-bye except to a small number of people, lest they should try to retain him. He departed and returned to Les Vans, running the same perils and experiencing the same inconveniences as before. From there, he left for Uzès to attend to some business and to pay his respects to the bishop.

At the start of their conversation, the prelate embarrassed De La Salle somewhat by trying to extort from him something that he could not grant without harm to his Institute. The bishop listened kindly to the arguments of the Founder and desisted from his request, so the matter was dropped. The bishop had felt that the success of the Christian Schools required that the teachers not be transferred. On that account, he was opposed to any change in the personnel of the school at Les Vans. When De La Salle explained to him the inconvenience that would follow from such a procedure and said so very forcefully, the good bishop, who was only seeking the greater good as he understood it, could recognize the cogency of De La Salle's arguments. The visit was concluded in that manner to the satisfaction of De La Salle, who received from the prelate his tokens of the warmest kindness and his promise to protect the Brothers in Les Vans.

## Attempts to win over De La Salle to new doctrines

Continuing his journey, he passed again through Alais and finally reached a celebrated city[19] which became the theater of the new persecutions that hell had prepared for him. He had been expected there for a long time. His reputation had preceded him, and the expectation was universal, especially among the clergy, who were eager to meet him. Everyone had in store for him compliments and offers of help. Some wished to win over a man whose great virtue had been announced by word of mouth. Others wished to make him adopt their

19. Marseille.

doctrinal positions and by overwhelming him with their kind services, to lead him to share their opinions out of regard for their persons.

Hardly had De La Salle arrived when all sorts of persons came forward to pay to his virtue the honor it deserved and to offer him all sorts of assistance. Many ecclesiastics among the most highly considered and distinguished in the city wished to be in his company. As they seemed to be worthy men, zealous for good works, and very favorable to his Institute, that was an easy approach for them. They frequently came to discuss with him the best means of spreading the Christian Schools in the city and in the entire province. Such favorable dispositions led the servant of God to conceive the idea of establishing a novitiate in the city. Everything seemed to point to a favorable outcome. The city was large, rich, and supportive of many good works; it contained a great number of clerics, men of merit and zeal such as Saint Paul described: *prepared for all sorts of good.* It numbered many wealthy, pious, and generous persons who gave liberally to charity and, most of all, showed a genuine esteem and appreciation for the Christian Schools. All these indications gave him great hope. The more he considered all factors, the more he felt that God had driven him from Paris, through the secret designs of his Providence, only so that he might come to that city to establish a local novitiate to train candidates from the area, who would be better able to labor in their home territory than others who did not know the spirit and customs and whose inclinations and even language were quite different.

Encouraged by all these considerations, he broached the project to those who seemed to him the most zealous. The plan was approved, and everyone wished to take part in implementing it. The holy Founder was not a little surprised when he found so much cooperation in the execution of a design which he had ventured to propose only with trepidation and which he had found so difficult to launch at Reims, Paris, and Rouen. As though vying with one another, everyone wished to contribute to the establishment of the novitiate. Almost all the parish priests of the city showed their interest, the bishop more than anyone else. Many persons from the city joined them. When one of the gentlemen began donating funds, the others promised to do the same in the future. Never was a godly work started with more unanimity, promptness, and zeal. A house was rented and furnished without delay. Everyone sought to bring in candidates, so that in a short time, there was a large number of them. Every day brought new good fortune.

## Initial success promises a bright future

Such a favorable start augured well for the future. Everybody wished to contribute to putting the final touches on this establishment. In fact, it was considered to be completed. De La Salle alone felt some reservations over such rapid success and feared to see everything buried underneath the ruins of such fine beginnings. The reason was that he did not see the work as founded on the rock of Calvary; hence, he wondered whether it would last. Enlightened as he was in the ways of God, the Founder had learned from his own experience and from that of the saints that undertakings which are not founded on the cross and which are launched without difficulties either do not disturb the devil very much or do not last very long.

Therefore he did not venture to let joy fully occupy his heart, fearing that the present success would dissolve in the misfortunes that the near future might bring. He worried that some secret motive, hidden under a deceitful mask of apparent devotion, might have taken the place of genuine charity and inspired the notable zeal which seemed to animate some of his backers. As he saw it, that would have been enough to cause the project to fail. God does not bless what is not done for his sake. If the Lord is not the *raison d'être* of the edifice men wish to erect, he does not take part in building it, and when it is not God's work, in vain do men wish to construct it. De La Salle's apprehensions were all the more solidly grounded, for he was not accustomed to seeing his undertakings so vigorously seconded. Nothing was newer for him than this unanimity of voices in his favor, this concerted action of so many people ready to open their purses to him. The continual opposition that he had to endure in all his other foundations made him question this one and made him fear that the rapidity with which it was being built might be a premonition of its downfall.

The happenings of life, however, do not always follow the same pattern, and from the success or the failure of one, we cannot with certainty conclude that another will be a failure or a success. The future is in God's hands alone, and he alone knows what it will be. Thus the holy Founder wavered between doubt and hope. For his part, he did what God asked of him and left the rest to Divine Providence. The novitiate was filled, and everything seemed to be going well. The enthusiasm of the people who had contributed the most to the undertaking, instead of growing weaker with time, seemed to gain new strength. Every day they wanted to do something else for this work. Their zeal, which previously had been dispersed and directed

to various objects, soon seemed to be concentrated on this one alone. It had become their sole preoccupation; they neglected or forgot about the others. They scoured the city and the countryside in search of more alms or to persuade other wealthy persons to assist the new undertaking with their liberalities.

If the same spirit had filled all these promoters, if the desire of honoring God had really been the only motive of their activity, there is every reason to think that the novitiate in Provence would still exist today. But the majority of the supporters were seeking only to win over the Brothers and their Superior, and they favored them only insofar as they would espouse the interests of their party.[20] If they were to remain inflexible and give no sign of being won over, the destruction of the novitiate would be decided on in advance, and open warfare would be waged against the Christian Schools.

However, among the many who collaborated in this undertaking, there were some who acted from right motives and who, in promoting this good cause, had only God in view. For a long time, those persons continued to support the novitiate. They even took steps to establish it firmly and to develop the Christian Schools in the city. There already existed Gratuitous Schools which were endowed, so all that needed to be done was to bring the Brothers into them. As for the parishes which had no schools, it was proposed to establish some schools for them. To further this design, a zealous Jesuit who was preaching the Lenten cycle of sermons in one of the main churches undertook to bring the matter before his hearers and to recommend it to them as strongly as he could. He did so very successfully. What he said about the importance and necessity of giving a good education and the necessary instruction to the young was well received, and several pious persons soon gathered to establish a Gratuitous School.

## De La Salle occupied with training the novices

While all this was being done to promote the growth of the Institute, De La Salle, on his side, was laboring to train the candidates who had been presented to him. He made this formation his unique occupation and did not feel that he had anything else to attend to. Because he had come to Provence to hide himself, as we mentioned, he revealed his presence as little as possible and left unanswered all the letters from the Brothers which reached him from all sides. He did so because he believed that the Institute's best interests required that he

20. The Jansenists, very active in Marseille.

give up all such contacts, so that his enemies might not turn against the Brothers the resentment that they could no longer vent on him personally. Moreover, under the mistaken impression that the Brothers in Paris had not been faithful to him, he did not know whom to trust. In addition, he thought that the Brother whom he had left behind him in Paris in his place would be able fill it and carry out all his duties successfully.

That Brother was, in fact, wise and moderate. He replaced his absent Founder as well as he could, and he did so with great prudence but also amidst considerable difficulty, because those Brothers disinclined to submission and hoping to dispense themselves from obedience objected that he had neither been elected by the membership nor appointed by De La Salle, as we have already said. However, De La Salle continued to correspond with the Brother who directed the novitiate of Saint Yon,[21] because he was convinced that the garden of the novitiate should be carefully cultivated, so that it would make up for all the losses which he foresaw the Society would suffer through his absence. Indeed, he trained some very good candidates there, and they would more than replace others whom relaxation or deceit would lead to ruin. The former were his comfort, and to them he could apply the words of Saint Paul, *You are my crown and my joy in the Lord*, and those of the beloved disciple, *I have no greater joy than to see my children walk in the truth*.

De La Salle did not, for all that, neglect the guidance of the Brothers in Provence and in the surrounding areas. Since they were not far away, he continued his ordinary ministrations to them. He had them come to him from time to time to renew them spiritually, had them make retreats, and tried to strengthen them against relaxation. Those who labored in the city he called back, as he had been in the habit of doing at Paris and at Saint Yon, and had them join in the exercises of the novitiate, thus maintaining them in fervor, dependence, and regularity. The zeal he showed for their perfection, which suited those who had retained a desire for holiness and did not neglect to strive to attain it, was not to the liking of a few tepid and relaxed Brothers. They would have preferred to see him far away instead of so near. His presence was a constraint for them, since he showed himself an enemy of false liberty.

De La Salle's strict spirit of regularity, which he exemplified in the most outstanding manner, began to weary these men. It was only under constraint and for pure form that they returned to the novitiate on

21. The novitiate had been moved to Paris during the famine of 1709.

the appointed days. The exercises in force there were a species of torture for such tepid and cowardly souls. Novitiate life seemed insupportable to men who were beginning to grow relaxed and who were tired of living under the eyes of a vigilant Superior who aspired only to virtue and holiness and who spoke only of the effort needed to attain them. Unhappy, bored, and discontented with a lifestyle which fervor alone makes enjoyable, they began thinking from the outset of how to put an end to it. How could they manage to do so? That was what embarrassed them, and it was no slight problem.

If they complained openly, they would be admitting their lack of virtue, their selfish, relaxed attitude. Their self-love could not abide such humiliation. Tepid souls show more of this disposition than others, and in them self-love increases as fervor diminishes. People who at one time had some virtue and have lost it are careful to keep up appearances; they often become consummate hypocrites. By trying to preserve a reputation for virtue which they have lost, they become whitened sepulchers which conceal vice and passion under a false semblance of rectitude.

## Scheme of the two Brothers to live independently

Finally, after much thought, the two Brothers of whom I speak found a way to attain their objective without causing any harm to their reputation. It was to plead that the obligation of fulfilling their school duties made it impossible for them to go back to the novitiate. They explained their problem, not to their Superior, who would not have accepted such an argument, but to the founders of the schools. They said that the welfare of the schools suffered from their frequent coming and going to the house where De La Salle lived. The excuse was cleverly framed, and it easily deceived people who were especially interested in the schools which they had founded.

When they went to make a sort of apology to those who employed them, the two Brothers were well received and were commended for the zeal they showed for doing their duty. They said that their consciences obliged them to point out that the classes were not functioning so well, because they were obliged to go so often to the novitiate, and that the schools could not really flourish unless the teachers remained within the limits of the parish as they had formerly done. With additional malice, they observed that they thought it a duty for them to inform these gentlemen that part of the revenues from the school endowments went to the novitiate to support the novices. Since they did not wish to do anything against the desires

and intentions of the founders, they felt obliged to let them know about the problem.

Their remarks, so clever and hypocritical, served to mask their own self-will. They wished to remain on their own domain and live there as they pleased, away from the vigilance of their Superior and far from dependence on him. Those men who for the last few years had been accustomed to breathe the air of independence, thanks to the distance separating them from their Superior, found intolerable the exact observance of the Rule which he required of them. Not knowing how to liberate themselves from it except through trickery and ruse, they made use of means which led to their own downfall and the destruction of all the good that De La Salle was beginning to do in Provence and in the neighboring areas.

The trumped-up charges invented by those two sons of Belial marked the beginning of a new persecution launched against their Superior. Like the small cloud that Elias the Prophet summoned to cover all the land of Israel, it grew little by little and finally culminated in the storm which we shall see bursting over the saintly priest. The persons to whom the complaints were addressed considered them well founded and important. They lent themselves to the bad will of the two Brothers and helped them recover their former liberty. The restrictions which these Brothers found so irksome seemed to the founders a disadvantage for the schools. They believed what the two Brothers wanted them to believe, namely, that De La Salle's insistence on having them attend the exercises of the novitiate interfered with their classwork and that by taking up so much of their time, he left them much less to devote to the students. Under the pretext of maintaining them in the spirit of poverty and detachment from all things, he used the revenues of the endowments to support the novitiate. Without trying to discover the true motive which made these two Brothers act as they did, these gentlemen paid attention only to their complaints, which they considered to be wise and well founded, and thought that they were doing right by helping two people get back their liberty, which is what they passionately wanted without letting it be seen.

Not without sorrow and not without foreseeing the evil results that would ensue, did the worthy Superior see the two dissidents withdraw themselves from his vigilance. But what could he do to prevent it? Without realizing it, the founders required such a change when they demanded that the two Brothers should remain in their residence, as they had formerly done. The gentlemen were insistent, and although it was flimsy, the pretext of greater good for the schools,

which the rebels had so cleverly advanced to obtain their own ends, finally won out. He had to yield and let the two Brothers live as they desired.

From that time on, De La Salle began to realize that in this city he would not enjoy the clear sailing promised him at the beginning and that these initial difficulties would not be the last. Still, people were busy about the opening of the new school, of which mention has been made. Preparations were progressing, and the holy Founder had been advised to call in the Brothers who would take charge of the school. Then, when everything seemed to be ready, suddenly everything fell apart.

## The Jansenists make their influence felt

As mentioned before, it was a Jesuit who had first launched the idea of this school. That was where the trouble lay. If anyone else had a hand in it, nobody would have made any objections; nobody would have opposed it. But in that city, as we said, a new doctrine was widespread and numbered many illustrious adherents. Another circumstance, which also had much to do with the failure of this school, was that a prominent person in the city, a man of superior intellect and considerable merit, had secretly become an enemy of De La Salle because he had failed to win him over to his own unorthodox sentiments. That cleric, the leader of all the group, was the most devious, insinuating, and subtle man in the world. He had approached De La Salle and seemed most friendly. He appeared to be a true supporter of the servant of God and would indeed have shown himself such, once he had won De La Salle over to his party. The two of them, however, did not see eye to eye and remained on guard against each other.

There is a time for everything, a time to be silent and a time to speak, and that time finally came. When the prominent ecclesiastic made the first overtures, he did not get very far without noticing in De La Salle's attitude and on his countenance that the Founder did not care for the new doctrine. That was enough for the man, so wise according to this world. From then on, he felt for the saintly priest the same sort of antipathy that he perceived him to entertain for his own sentiments. He resolved thenceforth to wage secret war against him but without seeming to break off their relations.

No sooner had the Jesuit finished his sermon stressing the advantages and the importance of the Christian Schools than the opponents got busy and started an intrigue to foil the plan. Secretly they

plotted against the project and decided that if they could not stop it, they would try to turn the schools over to others than the Brothers. To succeed in their attempt, they needed a leader with authority, intelligence, and recognized reputation.

Such was the person of whom we just spoke, and he was the one the party chose as the most capable individual in the city to influence people's minds. He gladly accepted the task and fulfilled it with extraordinary diligence. He felt honored in being at the head of his party and in doing it a service. He also enjoyed having a chance to spoil the plan recommended by a Jesuit,[22] and he gloated in advance over the opportunity of humiliating De La Salle.

Like the clever schemer he was, however, he wished to preserve the outward forms of charity in order not to risk alienating the public. Without breaking with De La Salle but, on the contrary, feigning to be closer to him than ever before, he worked underhandedly to alienate those who had become interested in the project and had donated funds. He suggested that it would be preferable to hand over the school to clerics rather than to the Brothers, since clerics, while teaching school, could also make themselves useful in the parish. As he was eloquent, clever, and had winning ways, he had no great difficulty in persuading everyone that he sought only what was good and was, in fact, pointing out where the greater good lay.

Once he was sure of that flank, he proceeded to circumvent the bishop, which he did with supreme skill, giving him to understand that the people who backed the new foundation had changed their minds about the Brothers, preferring to entrust the school to clerics, who could also render services in the parish where the school was to be established. He added that the benefactors were so well decided on the point that if anyone tried to dissuade them, they would give their money to some other work of charity. The prelate, who was strongly in favor of the Brothers and hoped to multiply their schools as much as possible in his diocese, was not a little surprised to hear of this change, the real motive for which he did not realize. But as he had not had time to discuss the matter with the benefactors, he feared to antagonize them by an act of authority. He therefore let things go their way and did not oppose the change.

The actor who occupied the center of the stage then finished playing his role. He went to De La Salle with a melancholy and afflicted air, like a man overwhelmed with grief. With words of commiseration and in a doleful voice, he told him that he had come on a

22. The Jesuits were strong opponents of Jansenism.

most disagreeable mission: to inform him that the people who were backing the new school had changed their minds and that they now wanted to entrust it not to the Brothers but to clerics. *God be blessed*, replied the servant of God; *apparently that is how God wants it.* Since upright hearts are never on guard against duplicity, the saintly priest, thinking that the man really entertained in his heart the sentiments that his lips uttered, thanked him most sincerely, feeling that he owed him a great debt of gratitude for the interest he was taking in the Brothers' Institute.

When his visitor had left, he went to prostrate himself before God to adore the decrees of Providence, to thank God, and to submit to his action. He foresaw the storms that would arise against him and asked for strength and courage to withstand them. Convinced that sin is the only real evil and that all other misfortunes in life are, in God's plan, means for our sanctification, De La Salle thought only of profiting by those that threatened him and of going forth to confront them with a submissive mind and heart. Like Job, he offered himself to the blows that he foresaw the hand of God was about to inflict on him, and like that holy man, he repeated: *Let my consolation be that in afflicting me, you do not spare me; multiply my bruises as you please and according to the number of my sins.*

Thus prepared for whatever might happen, De La Salle did not have to wait long to hear the first rumblings of the tempest which he had foreseen. Those who had shown so much enthusiasm for the Brothers' establishments soon became the most active in opposing them. But they did not sound the tocsin for the war they were preparing until they despaired of bringing the Superior of the Brothers around to the point where they had hoped to have him. As long as they still hoped to succeed, there was no ruse they did not employ to win him over.

They promised De La Salle all sorts of advantages for his Institute if he would share their sentiments. They made gifts to him, hoping to cause his resolution to waver. To their promises, they joined threats mingled with flattery. They came to visit him often, and during these visits, the burning questions of the day were continually brought up. New maxims, boldly advanced, were vehemently upheld, but either the holy Founder did not listen to them, or he showed his disapproval by an austere countenance, or else he refuted their views by some short, incisive remark, for he detested all quarreling, being convinced that error only grows stronger through argument.

## De La Salle reacts negatively to the theological discussions

The clerics, who held conferences regularly on certain days, were happy to have De La Salle in attendance and often invited him to come. The discussions were not always on topics of piety; the current theological issues were the matters ordinarily discussed. De La Salle was always amazed to hear from the same mouths the language of angels when they spoke of God and the language of Luther and Calvin when they spoke of the pope and the bishops. He could find no charity in those who affected to be the perpetual panegyrists of that virtue, and he could not understand how those who so strongly urged its necessity found it so easy to dispense themselves from its practice and showed no mercy to anyone not of their party. These discussants seemed to make a virtue out of blackening the reputation of their adversaries, and whoever slandered their foes most outrageously was considered the most truly zealous. The spirit of contention, passion, and vanity characterized the discussion of the peculiar opinions that were considered. Each one wished to show off his theological acumen, insisting on triumphing and making a name for himself. They rarely agreed among themselves, except to consign the Molinists—or at least those whom they considered Molinists—to perdition as Pelagians and enemies of the grace of Jesus Christ.

De La Salle suffered greatly during these meetings; he usually kept silent. When they insisted that he speak, he strongly defended the truths that had been attacked and the persons whose characters had been torn to shreds. He declared that he was not much edified by what he saw and heard. He regretted the time wasted in altercations, invectives, and the display of vain erudition. He advised them to replace such idle, unfounded, and novel theories, which lead only to wordy confrontations and threaten charity, with discourses that nourish piety and contribute to worthwhile knowledge. His remonstrances were not well received; they irritated men who had invited him only so that he might listen to them and bow before their decisions. Their pride was offended when they found one giving them lessons whom they had hoped to make a docile disciple. They resolved to avenge themselves, concluding that there was no longer any point in showing him friendliness, since they had nothing further to hope for from him.

## Persecutions from the Jansenists

Nevertheless, they had to camouflage for the eyes of the public the persecution they were about to start against De La Salle and parry all

suspicion that hatred and passion were the origin of the unfavorable reports they were on the point of spreading about him. After having honored, praised, and almost canonized him, they were going to decry him, blacken his name, and defame him. The public would have been shocked, if the way had not been prepared by voiceless rumors, by calumnies clothed in an appearance of verisimilitude and uttered by the mouths of devout people or by tongues accustomed to giving lies a ring of truth. But what could they find to criticize in a man whose life was so upright, whose morals were so irreproachable? Exaggerated regularity, excessive severity, invincible inflexibility, harshness that repelled others, stubbornness, and unyielding convictions that nothing could shake—such were the descriptions they used to oppose his extraordinary virtue, his solid doctrine, his spirit of recollection, mortification, and penance. Those virtues had been considered his vices, since his enemies had come to look upon him as a Molinist. Not that he really was one, of course, if we understand what this term actually means, that is, a follower of Molina. He was such in fact, however, in the meaning that those people attached to it, that is, an opponent of Jansenism.

The servant of God did not expect reproaches of that sort from people who pretended to such strict regularity in their conduct, boldly preached a severe brand of morality, and wished to pass themselves off as the restorers of the primitive spirit of penance. In recent centuries, when the Protestants claimed for themselves the noble name of reform, the example of penance given by Saint Charles Borromeo opened the eyes of all who did not insist on keeping them closed, so that they could see for themselves where true, interior, and supernatural virtue lay, that virtue which is inseparable from the true faith. The same distinction could apply to this later occasion, when we contrast De La Salle with the partisan proponents of the new doctrines. The latter preached penance in public; the former practiced it in secret. They claimed the appearance of reformation, but he gave the example of true reform. They spoke of nothing but grace and charity; he strove to draw down the one and to grow in the other. By thus comparing themselves with him, they tacitly admitted, while censuring him for his excesses in regularity, reform, and penance, that he really practiced virtue, whereas for them it was only a matter of appearance.

Not having anything else to reproach the servant of God with, his critics blamed his manner of governing. They disapproved the practices of piety he had established among the Brothers; they criticized as stilted and pretentious the recollected air that distinguished them;

they found fault with the different kinds of penance and mortification that De La Salle had learned from the saints and had introduced into his Community. They represented him as unconventional, harsh, unbalanced, inflexible—a man who never changed his mind. According to them, caprice was at the root of all his behavior. He was hard headed and agreed with nobody, and what was worse still, he wanted to mold everyone else to resemble him. He laid impossible burdens on the shoulders of the Brothers and subjected them to an impractical and outlandish lifestyle. In a word, they managed to misrepresent one of the most brilliant examples of virtue that has edified France in our century.

Considering De La Salle as a tacit censor of their conduct, they resolved to force him to leave the city. To oblige him to do so, they aroused all the idle people against him and made him odious to all those whose interests coincided with their own. Nor did they stop short at words. They acted in an underhanded way to dissuade people from giving him further alms, after discontinuing those which they themselves had at first bestowed on him. That stratagem seemed to them the quickest way of getting rid of him and of causing his Community to disappear quietly. Because famine makes the strongest city surrender, starving the enemy out is a sure method of conquest.

De La Salle was, however, a man who, like the great Apostle, knew how to endure hunger and thirst, who taught his disciples by his example to fast and abstain for long periods, and his enemies soon realized that this method of reducing resistance, so effective with others, would have little effect on him, since he was satisfied with bread and water and was accustomed to using even these with restraint. So they tried another line of attack against him: they worked stealthily to empty the novitiate. That proved easy for them. As they themselves had filled it with candidates devoted to them, it was not difficult for them to persuade the young men to leave. They approached most of the novices and got them to leave a house which they had encouraged them to enter in the first place. They turned away others who would have wished to join, telling them that De La Salle's way of life was too austere.

The novices who left echoed—or rather trumpeted abroad—the message given them by this group of founders and original supporters, and they published aloud what they had been saying more or less secretly to the disparagement of the servant of God. He was, they charged, excessively rigid in his approach, had no consideration for human frailty, and was as harsh with others as with himself. In the novitiate, they could neither raise their eyes nor open their mouths

nor make any use of their senses; the slightest fault was punished by some penance. People under such a regime became uncivil, uncouth, taciturn. The entire day was spent in exercises of piety and mortification. Often enough, it was claimed, the novices, their minds and bodies exhausted, would go to the refectory to find there practically nothing to eat or only food that inspired repugnance. To live there, they should have neither will nor judgment and should pay no attention to the body's needs. No one could stand this sort of life except De La Salle himself, who either was ruining the health of those who sought to imitate him or was driving them insane.

Thus it was that these gentlemen, using as proof the distorted experiences of unhappy novices, changed into crimes De La Salle's virtues of retirement, recollection, abnegation, mortification, obedience, and penance, in all of which he excelled and of which he gave such outstanding examples. Under hateful labels, they slandered virtues which outshone theirs. They went even further and published a pamphlet filled with calumnies in which the utmost malice had gathered together whatever could make him appear odious and rob him of all esteem. Their screed produced the effect that its authors hoped for. Since the malignity of the human heart inclines it to believe what is evil, the lying tract made everyone think the worst of De La Salle. People believed the evil that was said of him with no other proof than that they saw it in print. Such is the poison of calumny. It needs to advance no proof or appearance of truth in order to be believed. And even though defamation bears within itself the demonstration of its falsity, no matter how incredible it may be, people wish to believe it, especially when it is aimed at the most virtuous men.

## De La Salle responds to the calumny with equanimity

Since the evil effects of the pamphlet were spreading everywhere, the servant of God thought it his duty to try to contradict it. He issued a reply in which he let the truth speak for itself, and charity characterized all he said. He allowed no expression to fall from his pen which could satisfy wounded self-love, sting his adversaries, or make them think that he had been hurt by their venomous attacks. He contented himself with unmasking the falsity of their calumnies without saying anything that might wound the calumniators. The strongest thing he said was that his experience had taught him what the Church had to fear from a party which was gaining strength day after day and that he could foresee with sorrow the wounds that the Spouse of Christ would have to endure from such enemies.

Still, in spite of his attempt at refutation, calumny won the day. It spread from the city to the rest of the province and even reached the Brothers' establishments in the more remote places. There it produced all its malignant effects. The calumniator was believed on his mere word. Because he lied brazenly, nobody thought of questioning the facts he invented or of verifying them. What usually happens when true piety and sincerely devout persons are involved happened once again. People read the defamatory pamphlet with curiosity and evil-minded satisfaction, but nobody took the trouble to read the reply. They opened their ears to those who wished to slander the holy Founder but closed them against those who sought to vindicate him.

De La Salle did have friends who took up his defense, but they were not heeded. His allies tried to parry the blows aimed at him, to mollify irritated hearts, and to re-establish the honor and just deserts of the servant of God. But people's minds were too prejudiced against him, and his enemies kept repeating the old falsehoods while inventing new ones to add thereto. Things finally came to a head when they robbed the Brothers of the hope of extending their work. The latter had been promised a school in another very large parish, but suddenly no more was heard of such a school.

## Terrible effects of the calumny

The trouble spread farther and farther and even affected the hearts of the Brothers in the city, the province, and the environs. The novitiate had to be closed when the last novice left. Even the most resolute Brothers began to waver. Some of them abandoned the Institute, in spite of the prayers and remonstrances of their father. Those who were working in the surrounding areas but did not realize what was going on believed the false reports which were being spread about their Superior. They began to join their voices to those of others who were complaining and murmuring aloud.

There was the notorious Brother Director of Paris, whom we spoke of previously,[23] harsh on himself and even more so on others, who by inflicting such indiscreet and exaggerated penances, together with the Director of Novices, had given rise to the great persecution that was the start of all the others. He had been sent by De La Salle to open the school in Mende and had also been commissioned to visit the houses of the Institute in Provence. This Brother allowed himself to be influenced by all that was happening and left the Society. His

23. Brother Ponce.

desertion was neither sudden nor unforeseen. It took place with the deliberation of a man who had been planning it for a long time. Before leaving the house, he took care to set aside as much money as he could. When he had a considerable sum to line his pockets with, he departed with the embezzled funds.

It is easy to imagine the hurt such a father felt in his heart when he learned of the desertion and fall of the prodigal, who more than any other deserved the name of child of his sorrow. That was the cruelest blow he had to suffer during the persecution. He did not really experience its bitterness to the full, save when his bosom was torn by the very children whom he had begotten in Jesus Christ. The external warfare waged against him was not so unbearable to him, so long as it did not lead to conflict within his family that armed his own sons against him.

In this matter, his adversaries were able to attack him on the point where he was most vulnerable. If his enemies had been satisfied with ruining his reputation, they would have rendered him the greatest service he could have hoped for from them. By occasioning humiliation for him, they were striving to make him conformable to Jesus in his abjection. If those gentlemen had limited their attacks to discouraging his novices, the servant of God would have been able to bear it, for they would have been tearing down what their own hands had built up. But what overwhelmed him with grief was that they succeeded in worming their way into his own house and there making of his children other Absaloms in revolt.

In fact, the two Brothers we spoke of, who were the instigators of this persecution, at that time added insolence to their previous betrayer of their holy Founder. They did not blush to tell him that *he had come to Provence only to destroy instead of building up*. Such a reproach was as excruciating to him as their earlier disobedience had been, but the only vengeance he took was to show them new tokens of his meekness and kindness. Whether out of necessity and because he had no one else at hand or whether by a deliberate choice, the Founder sent one of these Brothers to Mende sometime later, where the rebel consummated his fall by open rebellion and fresh insolence, as did the other Brother, who had taken up his residence there without De La Salle's orders.

The reader will recall what we have already related: that wishing to establish themselves in this town, the two Brothers, thanks to the backing they got from the bishop and the senior magistrate of the city, were able to defy their Superior, who wished to change them from a place where they were becoming irregular. They proceeded to throw

off the yoke of dependence. Those ungrateful and unnatural children forced their father to leave the house, telling him that if he wished to stay, he would have to pay for his board.

## A planned journey to Rome is delayed by the bishop

Time, which effaces all things, in this instance only embittered people's minds the more. His patience had not appeased the hatred of his adversaries. They even profited by his withdrawal from the scene—for he no longer appeared in public—to spread abroad new calumnies about him. The interests of his Institute seemed to be seriously compromised in that part of the country, and he began to think that they would soon be irremediably jeopardized. Blaming himself as the cause of all this, he thought of leaving that region of France for good.

Because he was in a city with easy passage to Rome, De La Salle resolved to travel there in order to prostrate himself at the tomb of the Prince of the Apostles and to present his respects and offer his obedience to Peter's successor. That was not a new desire on his part. For a long time, he had felt himself inspired to make such a trip in order to satisfy his special devotion to the chief of the apostolic college, to secure from the Sovereign Pontiff the confirmation of his mission, and to ask him to approve his Institute. If time had permitted him to do so previously and if he had not feared to cause harm to his little flock by going so far away, he would have yielded to the inspiration with great satisfaction. But now, both the time and the opportunity of satisfying his desire seemed to have arrived. Freed from all other occupations and driven, as it were, from place to place, he believed that Divine Providence itself was beckoning him to Rome.

A vessel about to set sail for the capital of the Christian world provided De La Salle with an opportunity which he would probably never again have. The circumstances decided him to reserve a place on board and to have all the provisions for the trip purchased by the Brother whom he had chosen as his companion for the journey. Still, he did not wish to undertake the voyage without God's approval; the divine will was the only rule he followed. He did not listen to his own wishes, except when he recognized that they came from the Holy Spirit. In order not to let any human or natural element intervene in this decision, he was careful to maintain himself in total indifference with regard to the trip and to keep himself absolutely dependent on God's good pleasure. The following incident proves his attitude.

While awaiting a favorable wind, the servant of God prayed and recommended his voyage to God. He was ready to go and ready to

remain, according to those orders of Divine Providence which events would transmit to him. Up to this point, nothing had happened to oppose his desire; in fact, everything seemed to favor it. The ship was ready to weigh anchor; all the passengers were coming aboard. De La Salle followed them and reached the docks. Just as he was about to embark, he met the bishop, who stopped him and begged him to come back to his house. He wanted him to take possession of a school which he wished to entrust to the Brothers. Immediately the saintly priest obeyed and no longer thought of his trip to Rome. As though the voice of the prelate had been the voice of God, he returned home and said to the Brothers as he entered the house, *God be blessed! Here I am, back from Rome. It is not his will that I should go there. He wants me to busy myself with something else.*

Here, surely, we have an example of virtue which is not ordinary. It shows to what an extent De La Salle was dead to himself. A man must have no self-will if he manifests none in the project of a journey to Rome. Everyone knows by experience the irritation felt when meeting with obstacles to our least important plans. Nevertheless, in spite of the bishop's assurances, the school could not be opened at the time, because of the opposition of De La Salle's enemies.

True, the Institute did not lose anything by this postponement and has since been rewarded many times over for the disappointment it experienced then. Indeed, no other city in France has shown more zeal for the Christian Schools or more goodwill toward the Brothers. They have opened classes in every section of the city, classes which are so well filled that we might think that each was the only one available. If the blessings that God pours out on them are so abundant, we can truly say that they are the consequences of the crosses which De La Salle had to bear in that city. Today, his children reap with rejoicing what their father sowed with so much sorrow. The furrows where they reap are so productive because he watered them with his tears. They enjoy peaceful possession of a terrain where he had to endure cruel warfare. The tribulations were his lot; the rewards are for the Brothers. As long as the man of God lived, that city was his enemy. After his death, it became reconciled with his disciples, and today it brooks no rival in conferring on them all possible favors.

That is how God deals with his special friends. In this world, the cross is their lot. Everything they undertake is blamed, contradicted, opposed. The world looks on them with scorn. Against them, hell arms the hands of sinners and even those of worthy people. The opposition they encounter from them is ordinarily that which they feel most keenly. God himself seems to join in the fray and abandons

them when he sees them, like his Son, nailed to the cross. But once they are dead, everything they have suffered returns in the form of blessings. God has invested what they lost at a high rate of interest. He makes up to them in glory the ruin of their honor and, in the end, brings to nothing all that the world and the devil undertook against them. Where De La Salle had to suffer most, his Institute is now most flourishing. Where he was most despised, his children are now most welcome. Where he sowed amidst crosses and thorns, the Brothers are gathering a most abundant harvest.

## Chapter XI

*After the ruin of the novitiate, De La Salle finds his Institute deeply troubled in that region; attributing all these calamities to his own sins, he retires to a solitary place to let the tempest blow over; he goes to Grenoble, where he lives unknown and in retirement; he visits the Grande Chartreuse; he suffers another severe attack of rheumatism, relieved only by another session of painful therapy; he visits a holy hermitess known for her sanctity.*

We know what Saint Paul's zeal made him undertake; we know what love for his fellow countrymen made him suffer. We know that the hardness of heart manifested by the Jews produced in his soul a wound which made him agonize constantly. To prevent their condemnation, he offered himself to God as a sacrifice, and for them he would have been willing to be anathema for the sake of Jesus Christ. There was nothing which he was not ready to endure and by which to be immolated for their salvation. He would have taken delight in the most cruel tortures if thereby he had been able to expiate their sins and with his blood to wash away their ingratitude and malice. The spectacle of their blindness was for him a cause of affliction that nothing could console.

Every day, Saint Paul wept fresh tears over his people. What plunged him into desolation was that he wept over them as Samuel bewailed Saul, with tears that were unavailing because the malice of his people had reached its summit. We also see in Saint Paul the same love and the same tenderness for the Gentiles whom he had won for Christ. He made their joys and their sorrows his own. He loved them as his children; he bore them all in his bosom, eager to place them

into the heart of Jesus. He wept with those who wept, rejoiced with those who rejoiced, and made himself all things to all men to win them all to the One who had redeemed them. He caressed and consoled them with a mother's affection and sympathized with all their woes.

This portrait does not represent the great Apostle alone. We might say that the same brush he used to paint his likeness can be utilized to depict all those who possess an ardent charity, those whom God has made the spiritual fathers of a religious family. In varying degrees according to the depth of their love, they all feel the loss of those whom they have begotten in the Spirit. This helps us to understand what De La Salle suffered when, without being able to stop them, he saw some of his Brothers fall into wayward behavior and take the path of perdition. That sort of martyrdom lasted as long as his life itself, ever since he gave up being a canon of Reims. For at all times, he saw some of his disciples turn aside from their first virtue, go backward, and give scandal.

As we have already mentioned, many of the Founder's disciples insulted him, revolted against him, betrayed him, maltreated him, or abandoned him. So often had he experienced such sorrow that when he withdrew from Paris, he felt he could not trust himself to any Brother. True, the great majority remained faithful and profoundly attached to him. Nevertheless, he had so often experienced ingratitude, perfidy, indiscretion, or wrongdoing on the part of those on whom he counted and whom he considered the pillars of his Congregation that he anticipated similar failures on the part of others and more of the same kind of sorrows for himself.

If all the founders of orders have had to deal with this sort of trials, I think I can truthfully say that not one of them ever had to endure crucifixions of this type so frequently and to such a degree as the pious Founder whose life we are relating. It seems that God himself took pleasure in destroying what the pious priest had built up and what God himself had inspired him to work at. Almost everything that the holy man undertook was opposed, contradicted, or destroyed. Either he could not make his plans succeed or he saw them succeed only to be destroyed. In spite of it all, De La Salle blessed God, like holy Job when his servants came to announce to him the loss of his goods, the collapse of the house where his children were, or some other catastrophe, but the Founder remained inconsolable over the loss of his sons. That cross was always the hardest for him to bear. As charity grew in him, it diminished the keenness of his other woes but only increased the agony of this one.

The only relief he could find in his sorrow was in blind submission to the unfathomable judgments of God. He took occasion of them to humble himself and to redouble his penances and acts of fervor. That is how he used the relaxation and lapses of his disciples: to further his own sanctification. Desolate at finding cockle growing in the part of the Master's field that he had sown, he redoubled his efforts at cultivating the other parts and making them bear a rich harvest. Ashamed at seeing sin in a Community where the dew of heaven fell in such abundance, he humbled himself before God and blamed either his own negligence or his bad example. Brokenhearted when he saw vices sprouting among the virtues of his disciples, he thought he could find in himself the cause of the disorder, and he made himself accountable to God for the faults of his inferiors. Considering himself as something despicable in the presence of the divine sanctity, he confessed himself a culpable and sinful man who drew down God's malediction on whatever he undertook.

## De La Salle tormented by doubt

He began to ask himself whether his mission really was from God and whether a work that everybody opposed was not, in fact, the creation of his own spirit. Fasting and prayer were the two means he used, as he generally did, to discover God's will or to appease his anger. To assiduous prayer he joined strict penance and tried to take vengeance on his body for the faults of his disciples, for which he considered himself responsible. We have mentioned often enough already what a strong attraction he had for communing with God. Outside of prayer and meditation, nothing afforded him any enjoyment. In his sorrows and labors, that was where he turned for consolation and repose. In his doubts and difficulties, that was where he sought light and where he consulted the divine oracle.

But at the time of which we write, the holy exercise of prayer became for him a desert-like and arid land which offered him only thorns without flowers. His soul no longer enjoyed the divine sweetness; heaven held back its manna and no longer allowed it to fall before him. God spoke to him no more and left him in darkness. The Sun of Justice seemed veiled to his eyes, and his soul remained without energy or vigor. Such darkness was another reason for his desolation, harder to bear than the rest, as saintly souls well know. Tears can be sweet indeed when Jesus Christ deigns to dry them. Crosses are truly lightsome when he shows himself and helps us carry them. Abandonment by creatures is scarcely felt by a heart united with God,

one which enjoys the gift of his presence. When Jesus Christ consoles us, rejection and opposition by creatures are thorns with dulled points which we scarcely feel. But when God joins creatures in crucifying a soul, then it seems to be in a sort of hell or, more correctly, in a true purgatory. At such times, the more pure and ardent our love for God is, the sharper and more cruel the torment appears.

The servant of God found himself in that crucifying condition; he could address to God the words that the royal prophet places in the mouth of Christ on the cross, *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* Sometimes he might have added, *Will my sins separate me forever from you? When shall I be reconciled with you?* Like King Ezechias, he could exclaim, *My eyes are dimmed from lifting them on high and from offering you my longings and my distress.* With David he might have cried out, *I lift up mine eyes to the eternal hills where you have established your throne and whence I hope for succor. My soul sinks through weariness, but I await him who is my salvation. When, O Lord, will it please you to console me? My tears flow day and night while my enemies ask me, or rather I ask myself, Where is your God?* Thus the servant of God, afflicted by the Lord even more than by men, seemed to struggle with him and sought to force his goodness to yield to his tears and entreaties. No longer experiencing the consolations which he was accustomed to and which lightened his burdens, he blamed the loss on his sins and believed that they alone were the cause of the persecution which he endured on the part of both God and men.

Persuaded that this was so, the Founder resolved to withdraw for a time, to hide himself in some solitary place, in order, as he himself said, to bewail his sins and to throw himself, like a new Jonah, into the raging seas in order to calm the tempest. Abandoned by God and by men, he considered himself fit for nothing any more, and believing his presence to be the source of the opposition, he thought he might bring it to an end by departing. *My absence*, he said to himself, *may mollify those who are irritated against me and may suggest to them more favorable thoughts with regard to my dear children.*

## De La Salle retires to a hermitage

So De La Salle withdrew to a hermitage some ten or twelve leagues from the city. There, elevated above himself and all the world, he found himself like a traveler on some lofty peak where winds and storms no longer swirl. There he discovered a deep repose and sweet tranquillity. Occupied with God alone, he forgot everything else. If his

thoughts sometimes turned to his Brothers or his persecutors, it was to pray to God for them and to implore the Divine Majesty to uphold the former and to convert the latter. The injuries and outrages offered him had left in his soul no other traces but those that perfect charity inspires for enemies whom he loved in God and for God's sake. The saintly Founder had already begun to find his Mount Tabor in this desert, and like Peter, he exclaimed, *Lord, it is good to be here!* He enjoyed such peace and calm there that he would have wished to end his days in that spot, unknown to men, but he had not yet reached the end of his labors. God had others in store for him which would last until the end of his life.

## Rumors spread by his enemies

During this time, De La Salle's enemies spread the rumor that he had abandoned his Institute and that his departure had led to that of several of the other Brothers who had been the dupes as well as the imitators of his bad conduct. Nothing was more false. In truth, the saintly priest had several times been tempted to take up his residence in some parish, there to labor at the conversion of sinners, abandoning to the care of Providence a house from which his enemies wished to banish him by all means. Whether wiser counsel dissuaded him or whether a special light from on high showed him that such was not God's will for him, the fact is that the Founder's thoughts were not followed up and led to no action. He always kept the same tenderness for his children. If he stayed away from them for a time on this occasion, it was only through prudence. If he withdrew into solitude, it was not through caprice, ill humor, or melancholy but only to stay out of the sight of his adversaries and to procure some respite for the Brothers.

However, the rumor spread that De La Salle had broken down under misfortune and, despairing of being able to maintain his Institute, had abandoned it. This tale, although completely false, created a bad impression on people's minds. It tempted the Brothers, even the most resolute ones, to do as their Superior was supposed to have done. Those whom piety and a true vocation bound most closely to him were in consternation at this news. Confronted by such an unexpected turn of affairs, they were seized with extraordinary perplexity, not knowing what they should do. Fortunately, the falsity of this rumor was soon discovered by persons who were entirely trustworthy. They provided the facts to the credulous and pointed out that the people who had put out the report were given to barefaced lies and

were extraordinarily adept at deceiving the public. The slander was nothing but a stratagem invented to bring about the ruin of the Institute.

## The Director of the abandoned novitiate seeks him out

After the pious Founder had spent some time at the hermitage we mentioned, he retired to another solitary place in the city of Mende. There, far from men's eyes, the servant of God believed that people were thinking of him as little as he thought of them. Because he forgot them, he was persuaded that they had forgotten him. He was not a little surprised, therefore, when the Brother Director to whom he had entrusted the new novitiate came to meet him in this most recent solitude. This Brother had left the novitiate because there was nothing more to do in it, as there were no more candidates. De La Salle's departure had hastened the failure of the novitiate. His enemies, as we mentioned, had induced all the young men whom they had invited to join the Institute to abandon their vocation. It was to report that information to his Superior and to try to comfort him in his dark hour that the good Brother had come, and also to ask De La Salle for a new assignment.

The news did not surprise the holy priest; he had been expecting it. What amazed him was that anyone should still think of him. Like a man convinced that his memory has faded from the earth, he replied, *God be blessed, my dear Brother. What leads you to address yourself to me? Do you not know how unfit I am to command others? Can you be ignorant of the fact that several Brothers seem not to want me any more, that these words of the Gospel seem to apply to me: "We will not have this man rule over us?" They are quite right*, he added, *for I am incapable of it.*

The Brother, confused, edified, and touched by these words, displayed on his countenance the sentiments of his soul. Letting his eyes speak for his lips, he told him by his tears everything that his heart wished to say. Indeed, that worthy Brother had always preserved for his father a great depth of tenderness and veneration. He had come, in his straightforward way, to ask for orders. He threw himself at his feet and said that he would not leave until he had secured his father's blessing along with a new assignment. That Brother is the one who succeeded Brother Barthélemy and who today governs the Institute as Superior.[24]

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24. Brother Timothée Samson-Bazin.

When he had arrived in Mende looking for De La Salle, the Brother thought he would find him at the Brothers' residence. The Founder was no longer there. The father had been turned out by his own children, who had let him know that they no longer recognized him. They also said as much to the Brother who had come in search of his Superior, telling him there was no room for him in the house. The rude welcome and the disdainful air that accompanied it seemed strange to the one who was thus addressed, but his surprise vanished and he consoled himself when he learned that De La Salle had been the first to be treated thus, that when he had come to his own Community and his own house, he had met with this new resemblance to Jesus Christ who *came unto his own, but his own received him not.* The Brother met the holy Founder in the lodgings which Mademoiselle de Saint-Denis had put at his disposal, and there he lived as in a real hermitage.

That pious lady belonged to an aristocratic family and possessed a considerable fortune which she devoted to providing for and giving a Christian education to a large number of girls born to heretical parents. Some other women had joined her in this charitable and useful work and formed a community called Ladies of the Union. When she heard of the insult that his own disciples had offered to the holy Founder, she was inspired to take advantage of his disgrace to further the well-being of her own soul and that of her community. Filled with esteem and respect for his virtue, she aspired to the honor and the merit of rendering to this servant of Jesus Christ the same attentions that Martha and Mary paid to Our Lord himself. She was happy to provide him with board and lodging and everything else he needed.

At the time, De La Salle was making a retreat with the Capuchin Fathers. He had asked them for hospitality when he had been turned away by the Brothers of Mende, and they had charitably welcomed him. Mademoiselle de Saint-Denis envied them, so to speak, the merit of harboring De La Salle; she offered to provide for his expenses entirely, an offer which he accepted. The pious lady, delighted at having this burning lamp so near to her, wanted nothing more than to profit by his wisdom. She received from him much excellent advice for the guidance of her new community. The time that she managed to spend with him seemed short to her, and like Magdalen at the Savior's feet, she never grew tired listening to his words. Her zeal even led her to do all she could to make De La Salle stay in Mende, hoping to attach him to her community for its benefit. With this in view, she offered to pay him a salary as long as he lived and, after he died, to provide for a third Brother to be added to the two already in the city,

all this if he consented to stay with her. The servant of God, however, would not listen to such a proposal. What she did obtain from him was a set of regulations for her community. She took all possible care to profit by his stay in Mende, which lasted about two months. When he left, she bought him a horse with which to continue his travels.

## De La Salle goes to Grenoble to lead a hidden life there

From Mende, De La Salle went to Grenoble, where he thought he had discovered a new heaven and a new earth in the oasis of profound peace he found there. The Brothers in Grenoble realized what a treasure they possessed and took advantage of his presence. Delighted at having with them the father who had suffered so much persecution in Provence on account of more than one of his sons, not to mention outsiders, they tried by their kindness and attention to make him forget the sorrows he had suffered on account of the ingrates.

To show his appreciation, the Founder resolved to remain with the Brothers of Grenoble as long as he could. Everything concurred in making him decide thus: the good dispositions of the Brothers, the peace which reigned among them, the solitude that enveloped their residence, and the hidden, retired life he led there. In fact, unknown to nearly everybody and not eager to form new acquaintances, he hoped that he could remain in Grenoble like an anchorite in the midst of the forest, devoting himself to continual prayer and penance.

His attraction for these two exercises made him select the most retired room on the top floor of the house. Far from men, but occupied with God while hidden from the world, he was truly in his element. Once again, he was able to yield to his inclination to devote himself almost without interruption to prayer and mortification. His prayer had no other measure than that of the day itself, no other interruption than that of changing from one exercise to another. He left the Brothers only to return to his contemplation. He did not break off his interior prayer except to pray with them. Ever punctual at all community observances, he was always the first one in the oratory and left it last of all. While he remained alone with God, nothing interfered with his communing with him. He lived without seeing or being seen by anybody; such was his desire.

## He visits the Grande Chartreuse

Since it was nearby, he did not want to miss the opportunity of visiting the celebrated monastery which a saint from the same diocese as

his had founded in a setting of ice and snow, in order to make himself and his companions invisible to men, dealing with whom is so dangerous even to the most solid virtue. Exchanging one solitude for another when he left his own retreat, he could not fail to derive profit for his soul by going to visit the Grande Chartreuse, about three leagues from Grenoble. He could not fail to show his devotion toward Saint Bruno, whom he had imitated so closely by giving up, like him, a canonry in the cathedral of Reims and everything else that would make the world smile on him, in order to embrace a life as austere as it was humiliating.

On reaching that frightful desert,[25] De La Salle felt himself closer to God when he saw the spot which the restorer of the solitary life in the West had sanctified by his tears and by the rigor of his penance. With admiration he beheld those steep cliffs where an almost perpetual winter prevails, for they are hidden most of the time beneath snow and ice, so that those who dwell there seem to be buried alive. Edified by the silence and recollection which reigned among those solitaries, he felt his attraction for a retired life grow stronger than ever, and he would have wished to end his days among them.

The holy Founder was received with great hospitality, but he was not shown those special signs of distinction which custom in that holy house decrees must be offered to a canon of Reims, because he let no one know that he had once been honored by that title, and he did not permit the Brother who accompanied him to mention it. Among all the devotional places in the holy monastery which De La Salle visited, his heart was most charmed by the hermitage of Saint Bruno. His own associations with that saint moved him, and if he had followed his inclination, he would have been the second canon of Reims who hid in the cleft of those rocks. He had to do violence to his piety in order to leave the place, but if he went away in body, his spirit remained behind.

The prior, struck by the modesty and remarkable piety which the holy man could not dissimulate, realized that he was entertaining a distinguished guest. Without paying attention to the appearance of a poor priest that his guest presented, he honored, without knowing him, the virtue which shone out from beneath his shabby clothes, and he did all he could to persuade him to stay longer with them. De La Salle and the monks edified one another. In spite of himself, the Founder's sanctity, veiled under the mantle of poverty, revealed itself

25. Although isolated, the monastery is situated in the midst of some of the most impressive scenery in Europe.

during days devoted to holiness. Since those are most capable of discerning true virtue who practice it themselves, the saintly solitaries soon realized that the poor priest who was staying with them was a great servant of God. On his part, De La Salle took with him from this holy solitude all the edification he had come to seek. He left after three days, not having given to his devotion all the time he would have wished to allot to it but all that he could spare from the business of his Congregation. He returned to Grenoble filled with esteem and veneration for that celebrated monastery.

After he returned to the city, De La Salle once again took up his retired way of living, with new affection for it. His eagerness to serve God seemed like that of a fervent novice who, on leaving the world, is in a hurry to repair the sins of his past life and the time already lost. He gave himself to interior prayer like a man who finds there his very element and cannot live apart from it. When the bell called the Brothers to the oratory in the morning, they found him kneeling there in the attitude of someone who had spent a good part of the night in prayer or at least had been engaged in it for a long time.

During the day, if anybody wanted to find him, it was no use looking for him anywhere but in his little corner reserved for prayer, where three persons could not have managed to squeeze together, much less take a comfortable posture. He stayed there like the dove in the cleft of the rock, as Scripture says, and never complained except when he had to leave it. He put aside with ever-renewed determination whatever could distract him from God or shorten his communing with him. Thus he received very few visits. He had already been in Grenoble for some time before anyone knew it. He did not want to know or to be known, and he showed clearly that he could get along without others, so long as he could converse with God.

## De La Salle teaches class

However, he did not yield to his attraction for continual prayer to such an extent that he could not succeed in weaning himself away from the delicious milk that God provides to pure souls during this life when the opportunity for practicing other heroic virtues presented themselves. He was ready to leave the embraces of his heavenly spouse when God's will called him elsewhere.

By De La Salle's orders, the Brother in charge of the school in the Saint Laurent parish had undertaken a long journey for the interests of the Community. The holy Founder took his place and devoted himself

to teaching the children with that gentleness, patience, attention, and calm that all the Brothers should show when exercising their functions. Thus we might have beheld this doctor, this former canon of Reims, this founder of a Congregation, showing himself honored, taking pleasure, and considering it a duty to teach the children, to help the little ones learn their *abc*'s, to encourage the older pupils to read and write, and to impart to all of them the rudiments of Christian doctrine. The way in which he fulfilled his duty showed clearly enough the joy he felt in fulfilling it and his assiduity in practicing the different virtues which at every moment are called for in a classroom. If the Founder showed favoritism for any students, it was toward the poorest ones. His concern for them was manifested by the trouble he took to help them make progress in reading and writing, for, as he said, those were skills they badly needed. That was how his humility succeeded in hiding his charity. His zeal in their regard made them his favorites during the catechism lessons which he taught them every day. Again, the students he singled out for special care were the most ignorant ones. Such children, usually abandoned to their natural stupidity or light-headedness by teachers lacking in zeal or charity, became the objects of his predilection and occasions for displaying his patience.

God blessed his efforts, showing that kind and patient zeal finally succeeds and can work miracles, even on the most limited intelligences. Ultimately, he managed to teach these children the truths of religion and cause them to advance in reading and writing. Here we have an outstanding example which should be imitated by all those in charge of youth. Unless we are on our guard, self-love can seek its satisfaction in a classroom as well as anywhere else, and then natural inclinations take over. We neglect the poorest, most stupid, and most ignorant pupils and those who are not naturally attractive, reserving our zeal for those who are agreeable to deal with.

Not wishing to shirk in any way the duties of a schoolmaster, our holy priest, as is the custom among the Brothers, brought his pupils, two by two, to church to hear Mass. Only after settling them in order did he ascend the altar to celebrate. And how did he do so? With modesty, interior spirit, and reverence which drew to him the eyes of all his little students and of all the people in the congregation. At such times, the holy man forfeited his attraction for the hidden life, for he showed everybody who he was. After seeing him when he brought the children to church or said Mass for them, people called him nothing but "that holy priest." Such was the name that his humble ministry merited for him in Grenoble.

When the Brother he was replacing came back, he and De La Salle resumed their usual occupations. The Brother once more took over his duties in the classroom while the servant of God returned to his life of retirement, prayer, and penance. The only distraction the Founder allowed himself was the composition of several works of piety for the instruction of youth and for the use of his disciples. He also revised his book, *The Duties of a Christian*, thus providing a third and more accurate edition.

While so usefully occupying his time in solitude, De La Salle learned, to his great joy, that God had finally brought back peace to his foundations in Provence and that everything was quiet there. Convinced that if he returned, his presence might arouse new trouble there—for his enemies were not dead, nor had they changed their attitude as far as he was concerned—he resolved to stay away. He limited his efforts with regard to Provence to prayer, letters, and dispatching special visitors to the Brothers. The city where he had been so badly treated had the first place in his prayers and sacrifices. The Brothers who had been so disturbed and exposed to seduction received his vigilant attention. He encouraged them and comforted the others by his letters. Finally, as he did not dare go to visit them, he entrusted that mission to certain of his disciples possessing superior capacities.

## An attack of rheumatism calls for a painful remedy

He had barely finished the re-editing of his works when he suffered another violent attack of rheumatism. His mortifications had brought it on, for he had paid no attention to the early symptoms when he felt them, and he had not mitigated in any way his usual manner of life. His failure to take proper care of himself proved costly. As the illness grew worse, his sufferings increased and soon became so unbearable that finally he had to yield and stay, first in his room and then in bed, where he was practically helpless, unable to move his limbs. Next, a fever broke out and caused concern for his life. Some pious persons who had come to know him when he was teaching school, fearing to lose him so soon after having known him so late, hastened to show him the anxiety they felt over his condition and spared nothing to secure some relief for him. His disciples, brokenhearted on seeing him in danger of death, surrounded his bed day and night and spared nothing which could help to preserve a life so necessary for them. They wept in his sight and sympathized with his pains with all the tenderness of devoted sons.

De La Salle tried to console them and to console himself with them, reminding them of the example of Job and repeating his words: *God be blessed! Let his will be done, not ours. If we receive health from him, it is only right that we should endure illness with constancy. Let his holy name be blessed eternally!* The first and last of these expressions, so deeply fixed in his soul, were constantly on his lips, and he left them to the Brothers as a sort of slogan. At this time, he should have been content, and his desire for suffering should have been satisfied, because his pains were sharp and piercing and extended all over his body. All the remedies used seemed only to aggravate the illness. To find a remedy which might work, several had to be tried out on him, and he had the merit of seeing his pains increased by the very means which were supposed at least to alleviate them.

There existed, in fact, one effective remedy which had already been tried on him with success in Paris. The cure was worse than the disease and was a true martyrdom, as the reader will remember from what was said of it before. Still, it was necessary for him to have recourse to it or else to remain in bed half crippled. The two alternatives were terrible enough; each made nature tremble. However, if he had listened to the flesh, he would have preferred to suffer the agonies of rheumatism for a long time rather than cure them through a therapy which itself was a terrible torture. That in itself was enough to make him choose the treatment. Moreover, he was anxious to recover his health, less for his own relief than for the sake of helping and consoling his Brothers, who were afflicted and worn out on account of him.

For the second time, therefore, he was stretched out on a bed of torture, made like a sort of gridiron, and the pain he endured caused him again to resemble Saint Lawrence. He faced the agony with such heroic patience that it seemed as though the spiritual fire which charity had enkindled in his soul was even more ardent than the flames which caused his flesh to suffer. On this second occasion, as on the first, the servant of God found healing in this treatment. In a short time, he was relieved and gradually regained his strength.

De La Salle's greatest regret during the first days of his convalescence, as during his illness, was that he could not stand at the altar to immolate the spotless Lamb, for he was far from sharing the attitude of those who seem to show their devotion by excommunicating themselves, as it were, depriving themselves of the Body of Christ and who, while making much ado about their priesthood, let this august dignity remain sterile in them. He had learned from the Apostle that the duty of a pontiff is to offer sacrifice to God, and so he made it a

duty for himself to celebrate Mass every day. His love for Jesus Christ and his desire to procure God's glory made this an obligation for him; nothing could prevent him from saying Mass when it was possible for him to do so.

This longing brought De La Salle to the altar as soon as he was able to walk again without falling. As he could not go very far, the Brothers assisted him by bringing him to the little chapel in the hospice which the Carthusians have at Grenoble. He said Mass there as soon as he was able to stand. During that illness which forced him to remain in bed almost without moving, to make up for the Divine Office which he could not recite and for all the other exercises of piety, he said the rosary several times each day and kept himself united with God through the use of continual short prayers.

## De La Salle goes to Parménie to make a retreat

Once he was well enough, De La Salle's first concern was to make a retreat in order to recoup his spiritual losses, as he called the omission of his interior prayer and of his other habitual exercises of devotion. As he was looking for an appropriate place to make this retreat, Abbé de Saléon urged him to spend a few days at a country place of his, called Parménie, some four leagues from Grenoble. The priest's kind offer was just what the holy Founder needed, and he accepted it. Because that solitary place favored recollection, several persons went there to make retreats.

Parménie is located on the crest of a high mountain which in the past was uninhabited. The place was frequented only by shepherds who brought their flocks there to graze and by the inhabitants of the village at the foot of the mountain, who every year went in procession to a cross erected on the mountaintop. That rustic spot, fairly well known today, owes its celebrity to a poor village girl, named Louise, who enjoyed a reputation for great holiness. Louise had come to live at the foot of the cross we just mentioned. Her attraction for solitude and the presence of the cross which she beheld made her sojourn on the mountain agreeable to her. Her deep piety and her profound innocence prepared her for receiving communications from God. She carefully avoided contacts with people and made a paradise of that place where she felt closer to heaven and where the cross of Jesus Christ served as her book. As God's grace grew in her soul, so did her desire to fix her abode permanently on the mountain, in order to be closer to God alone and to concern herself solely with matters spiritual and divine.

She obtained the consent of Abbé de Saléon, to whom the property belonged, and there, with the alms that she begged for, she had a small house built; her poverty made it impossible for her to pay for a larger construction. She lived in that dwelling like the courtesan Thais in her cell. But the more she wished to remain unknown, the more she became known. The name of the hermit shepherdess spread everywhere, and she soon became famous. People came to the mountain to see her in order to be edified. Several persons, touched by the grace of God, remained with her to spend a few days in retreat. Soon the house, which was too big for her, became too small for those who came to consult her or to profit by her instructions and example. Seeing this multitude of people who visited her hermitage, she felt herself inspired to build new lodgings, one for men and the other for women. The project called for money. She sought it in the same way she had found the earlier sums, by appealing to the liberality of persons interested in works of piety. With the funds which humility had begged for and which charity donated, she added a small chapel to the two wings of the buildings she was constructing.

However, if what people say is true, she had to suffer more than the shame of begging while she was gathering the money she needed to build. Apparently, when she was collecting alms in the diocese of Lyon, she was arrested and put into prison by the orders of the archbishop. The humiliation only heightened her zeal for the execution of her project instead of extinguishing it. She even comforted the pious persons who bewailed her arrest by assuring them that the one who had her locked up would soon set her free again. It happened just as she had predicted. Even more, the archbishop, to make amends somewhat for the stain he had inflicted on her reputation by having her put in jail, gave her a considerable sum to help build the church.

This new Généviève became the oracle of the whole countryside. People came from all over to consult her. Even the Lord's ministers themselves did not disdain to ask her for enlightenment and did not feel that they were demeaning themselves by seeking advice from this unlettered woman whom everybody considered a prodigy of holiness. Among the gifts with which heaven favored her, the discernment of spirits and knowledge of the future were the most remarkable.

## Sister Louise and De La Salle in mutual consultation

When De La Salle was at Parménie, so near to this celebrated Sister Louise of whom everybody spoke, he did not fail to make use of the

opportunity of seeking edification from her presence. He went to visit her and conversed with her for a long time, and he did so on several occasions. He recognized the extraordinary graces that God had been pleased to impart to the soul of this humble village woman, and he became, like so many others, her panegyrist. In her turn, she discovered in the soul of this priest who spoke to her the eminent perfection that the cloud of slander and defamation kept hidden from the world. She felt herself filled with respect and confidence in his regard.

Such men being rare on this earth, Sister Louise resolved to profit by De La Salle's presence to open her heart to him, to consult him, and to ask his advice. She did so with all the candor and simplicity of a humble soul that seeks God and hides nothing. In the account of her life which she gave to the holy priest, she mentioned in detail the struggles she had to undergo in her solitude and the vexations of the demons. She remarked that since she had built the two retreat houses, Satan's attacks had become more violent and more frequent. The servant of God gave her on this point the counsels that the Spirit of God inspired him with. They seemed to satisfy her very much.

In his turn, the Founder wished to profit by the insights of this new Deborah. He told her about his past and present sufferings and the opposition he had encountered ever since he had undertaken to establish the Christian Schools. Louise found it all very surprising. She could not get over the fact that such a worthy enterprise, so useful and so necessary, could have met with such opposition in the midst of a Christian country. As though by God's inspiration, she told De La Salle in that connection that he was not yet finished with his labors, that he would have to suffer still more, but also that a crown was in store for his patience. The holy priest admitted to her that he ardently longed to spend the rest of his days in solitude, which attracted him strongly, in order not to have to think of anything except God and himself. *Such is not God's will*, replied Louise. *You must not abandon the family that God has made you the father of. Labor is your lot; you must persevere in it to the end of your days, combining as you have done heretofore the life of Magdalen with that of Martha.*

In this answer, De La Salle recognized the order of God. He admired the wisdom of Providence, which had brought him from one of the extremities of the kingdom to hear this saintly woman interpret for him the divine will. Thus those two lights illuminated each other, and their mouths were used by God to impart his commands to each other. Their holy conversation seemed too short to both of them when it came to a close at the end of the two-week retreat which the servant of God had resolved to make. De La Salle and Sister Louise said

good-bye with mutual joy over having met one another but with regret over the prospect of never seeing each other again.

It is hard to say which of the two was the more highly edified and pleased. Louise rejoiced because she had seen a saint on this earth, sent to her by God in her place of retirement. She could not sufficiently bless the divine wisdom which had brought to her on the top of her mountain the director she had needed, so enlightened in God's ways. For his part, the holy Founder did not admire any less the dispositions of Divine Providence which through unerring paths unknown to him had brought him from Paris to a mountain at the other end of France to present him to this village woman who instructed him and then, like a humble disciple, asked of him lessons in perfection.

Their heavenly adventure was considered by both as among the greatest graces God ever gave them. They never forgot it, and they thanked him for it every day. Louise, who did not know how to read, wanted to have copies of the writings of the servant of God, even though she could not make use of them, and he could not refuse her request. She looked upon the books as a souvenir of the opportunity God had given her of seeing him, as a deposit which she preserved like a relic in her solitude. On his side, as long as he lived, De La Salle wished to profit by the vessel of election he had found hidden in the wilderness. From time to time, he wrote to her amidst his greatest difficulties in order to obtain light in his doubts.

## The benefit De La Salle derived from his visit

On his return to Grenoble, the servant of God gave proof of the benefits he had reaped from his contacts with an earthly angel hidden under the weakness of the female sex. His words were fiery, and his soul seemed entirely rejuvenated. His fervor was more obvious, while his ardor for perfection knew no further difficulties. He was like Moses descending from the mountain; he showed no signs of mere human nature in himself but rather seemed to have been deified after his intimate contacts with God and the conversations with his servant.

The Brothers who had the happiness of living with the Founder looked upon him with renewed admiration and listened to him with renewed respect. He rewarded their hospitality by the priceless lessons he gave them on perfection, the paths leading to it, the courage it calls for, the renovation of spirit it demands, the importance of striving for it when they are yet young, and the constancy needed in persevering in the practice of virtue.

His disciples profited by the instructions and examples given them by their father and hastened after him in the way to heaven. They drank deeply of the pure water which springs forth unto eternal life, which he had brought to them with such abundance from Parménie, so that they became truly spiritual men through his company. The master could enjoy no greater consolation than that of seeing his disciples making progress in virtue.

He was experiencing this solace when a new cause of trouble came to interfere with it. He was still living with the Brothers in Grenoble when the Constitution *Unigenitus* was received in France and officially accepted. It was published in Grenoble, as in almost all the other dioceses of the kingdom, in the year 1714 by M. Ennemond Alleman de Montmartin, who later changed his attitude, however, and issued a second pastoral letter contrary to the first one. His second letter was not welcomed in such a Catholic diocese, except by those who had inspired it.

## De La Salle declares himself in favor of the papal Bull

De La Salle had always shown great reserve with regard to the questions involved. His principle was to announce his faith by his works rather than by his words. Now, however, he felt that it was time to speak up, since people everywhere were taking it upon themselves to give opinions for or against the papal decree. To speak up with more certainty and more effect, De La Salle waited until the celebrated Bull of Clement XI, which condemned the 101 propositions taken from the book, *Moral Reflections on the New Testament*, had been duly and properly promulgated. Then he made it a matter of conscience for himself to state his position and to confess outwardly the inner sentiments of his heart, without fearing the reprisals of the powerful party which had caused him so much harassment in Provence.

De La Salle would have preferred to remain silent, if the circumstances of the times had allowed him to do so, because he was a great lover of peace. On the one hand, he knew that the progress of false doctrines is rarely arrested by controversy and that calumny and persecution would be the reward of those who opposed them. On the other hand, if he had failed to take sides resolutely and publicly with the adherents to the Constitution, such reticence might have made his position appear ambiguous in a matter of doctrine or placed him among those who tolerated or were indifferent to error. He spoke out, and he did so with zeal. His zeal was enlightened, wise, and controlled by the motions of the Holy Spirit. He read the celebrated Bull

to his disciples along with the pastoral instruction of the clergy. He explained all of the 101 propositions, made their meaning clear, showed the hidden or obvious poison that they contained, and illustrated the error and danger they involved.

His zeal would have been only half satisfied if he had limited it to his disciples alone. At a time when people from every walk in life, including women, were taking the liberty of dogmatizing and speaking against the Holy See and the bishops, he thought that as a priest and doctor in theology, he was obliged to take up the cudgels to defend the anointed of the Lord and the doctrines of the Church. The holiness of his life afforded him an advantage that not everyone had in dealing with error. The uprightness of his conduct, the purity of his morals, and the austerity of his penance gave him the right to unmask the pharisaism of Quesnel's partisans and to put to shame those who tried to assume the exterior appearance of virtue.

Without insisting as much as they on the discipline of the early centuries and without trying to pose as a great reformer or restorer of the pristine spirit of penance, De La Salle illustrated both in his person, and he renewed the example of the early Christians. Still, he said nothing bitter or offensive against the enemies of the Constitution. Without passion or false zeal, he spared their persons while combating their opinions, and by his conduct, he showed that it is in deed, not merely in word, that we must give praise to charity. Yet he was very careful to warn people against them and their books. He forbade those who consulted him to have anything to do with such men or to read their works, and without saying anything bad about these new enemies of the Church, he made people fear to be led astray by them.

The servant of God was rewarded as the saints usually are in this world. I mean that he was assailed by calumny and persecution. The friends of Quesnel, who speak and write so feelingly about charity, invented and spread lies about him in order to discredit him. It is well known what they were capable of saying about a resolute partisan of the Constitution, so we need not go into details here.

They did not succeed, however, in defaming the servant of God in Grenoble. His virtue was too well known in that city, and all the shadows that the Quesnelites tried to project onto it only served to bring it out in bolder relief. On that occasion, the party went down to defeat. Even those who were the least passionately involved in the dispute judged rightly that truth could not be on the side where there was no charity and that a teaching opposed by such a great servant of God should be rejected.

# CHAPTER XII

*What was going on in France during the absence of De La Salle.*

If we were permitted to judge of the actions of the saints, who conform to principles so markedly different from those of other people and who, often enough, act outside the ordinary rules of human prudence because they are following the motions of the Holy Spirit, we might be tempted to condemn the precipitate and secret flight of De La Salle to Provence. It occasioned great turmoil in his Institute and came near bringing about its ruin. It would seem, in fact, that before taking this resolution or before leaving Paris—or at least after his arrival in Provence—the holy Founder should have informed the Brothers, let them know where they could write to him, answered them, directed them by letters from his place of retirement, and, in short, appointed the Brother whom he felt best qualified to take his place in Paris, one whom the others would then have honored as their Superior in his absence.

The servant of God did none of these things. He went into hiding in the most distant provinces and did not want to let anyone know where he was going. He remained there unknown and did not reply to the letters he received from the Brothers. He did not even designate anyone to replace him during his absence. Finally, as far as the Brothers in France[26] were concerned, he showed no sign of life or movement, as though he were actually dead. No doubt, a man as wise and enlightened as he must have had serious reasons for acting this way, but it is impossible for us to guess what these reasons were.

Did he want to accustom the Brothers to get along without him and thus oblige them finally to choose one of their number for their Superior, a thing they had never wanted to do while he was among them? Perhaps he carried humility and the low sentiments he entertained of himself to the point of considering himself as a source of malediction and the cause of the troubles which constantly beset the Congregation. Perhaps he thought that some of his own disciples had gone over to his enemies and that he could no longer trust anyone. Perhaps, finally, he wished to persuade his adversaries that he no longer intervened in the government of his Institute, hoping thereby to disarm their ill will.

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26. France, that is, the northern provinces around Paris.

## Disorder that results from De La Salle's long absence

Whatever may be the truth about this matter, we are reduced to mere conjecture, since De La Salle never wished to give any explanations on this score, although he was frequently asked to do so. Yet his precipitate and hidden flight gave rise to several difficulties which followed. The first of these was that even though there did not arise among the Brothers any dispute such as had arisen among the Apostles as to which of them was the greatest, there was uncertainty as to whom the Brothers should obey. De La Salle not having made this clear, there was no certain rule to follow on this point. The second disorder, which followed on the first, was that in the absence of any clearly recognized authority, a good many faults remained uncorrected, and thus the indocile remained unpunished. A third difficulty was that a few Brothers, weak in virtue and wavering in their vocation, considered their state as uncertain and unstable and left it. Others, suspecting that the holy Founder himself had abandoned the Institute, felt that they had a right to imitate his example. A fourth source of trouble was even more dangerous, for it gave rise to another form of government which De La Salle's rival, of whom we have so often spoken, finally managed to introduce into the Society.

The Institute seemed mortally stricken. Undermined to its foundations, it was threatened with collapse. Its ruin had indeed begun, and it is a sort of miracle that it eventually managed to rise again with brighter prospects and greater success than ever. Nothing could prove more clearly that it had God for its true author and that the former canon of Reims had merely been God's minister. If the Institute had been De La Salle's work, it would have passed into oblivion, and people would scarcely know that there had ever existed a Community called the Brothers of the Christian Schools. But because God was its real Founder, it could not be destroyed, either by men or by the devil. If they succeeded in altering its spirit and government for a time, that was only in order to show forth the divine power that re-established it after its eclipse and brought it forth rejuvenated from its tomb.

At the death of Jesus Christ, the Synagogue exulted and thought that the infant Church would be buried with him in his sepulchre. God permitted that mistake in order to give back a new life to the members, as well as to their head, and to show that he holds the keys to death and to life. Christ's resurrection was the miracle which served as the proof of all the others, for that miracle, the most stupendous of all, is the invincible proof of his divinity, of the truth of his religion, and of his Gospel. From his death itself, Jesus Christ drew forth our

life and his glory. It is more glorious for him to have died and to have risen again than if he had ascended to heaven without experiencing death.

May I be permitted to apply this reflection to our present subject? If the Institute had always remained flourishing under the eyes and leadership of its father, in spite of all the storms that shook it, the finger of God would be quite evident, and no one could reasonably deny that the Holy Spirit was the guide of a religious family that flourished amidst persecutions. The Founder himself, seeing his children increase and greeted by the blessings of men for their outstanding reputation for holiness, would have enjoyed the consolation given to nearly all the founders of religious orders. Instead, what was particular to him is that not long before his death, he saw his Institute in turmoil, and shortly after his death—no doubt thanks to his prayers—he could see it, from heaven, restored and more flourishing than ever. To whom can we attribute this sort of resurrection, if not to him who *alone does mighty deeds*, as the Prophet says, to him who mortifies and who gives life, to him who draws good from evil and blessings from losses?

As we shall see, De La Salle witnessed before his death a new form of government imposed on his Community which, naturally speaking, should have caused its ruin, but he also had the consolation of seeing the end of such an innovation. The great series of persecutions which at one time seemed to annihilate his Congregation only served to purge it of the unworthy members it contained and to cause it to enter at last upon a stable and flourishing state.

## Indecision of the Brothers as to what should be done

While De La Salle was busy only with his own sanctification in the hidden existence he led far from Paris, the Brothers in the capital and those in the neighboring schools suffered much from his prolonged absence. They did not know what had become of him, and all the efforts they made to find out remained unavailing. The more they were attached to their vocation and to his person, the more their chagrin grew day by day. Time, which usually heals all things, could not comfort them. Sometimes hoping to see him again, sometimes fearing to have lost him, they were sad and desolate. The Brothers did not know the reason for the Founder's silence and seeming indifference, so that he appeared to have forgotten his sons whom he so greatly loved. Most of the Brothers, besides being uneasy over his fate, were also deeply perplexed over their own. After doing all they could to

discover where he was hiding, they almost despaired of finding him again. Some thought he was dead; others imagined that he had abandoned the Institute. Each advanced his own arguments, differing from those of the others, and some were becoming unsettled in their vocation. All felt themselves hesitant and uncertain.

Their quandary was, at first, to know whether they should wait any longer before adopting some solution or whether they should let the Institute pass through a sort of interregnum until some news came about him. In the meantime, each Director of a house would govern it as he saw fit. But as time went by and no word came from De La Salle, uncertainty also grew about what was to be done. Whom should they obey? Who should be recognized as the Superior? De La Salle had not designated anyone, nor had the body of the Society chosen anyone. Had the time come to select someone? How could this election be carried out?

A body cannot subsist without a head; the members need a leader to direct them and communicate his influence to them. If De La Salle was still alive, nobody wanted any other Superior. If he was dead, then it was necessary to choose another Superior. But was he really dead, or was he still living? Nobody knew. Would he ever come back to the Brothers, or was he lost to them definitively? Here again, there was nothing but uncertainty. If he were to come back some day, would it not be offering him an injury and seeming to wish to replace him if they named another Superior? But if they were never to see him again, could they any longer delay in choosing another capable of succeeding him? Suppose that an election was needed: when, where, and how could it be held? Time, place, and manner all presented difficulties. The only practical time would be during the summer holidays; any other time would cause too much disruption in the houses and schools. Where could the Brothers meet? That, too, was a knotty question. In Paris, the Brothers still had many enemies, and they realized that De La Salle's rival would not fail to interfere in all their deliberations and would try secretly to control the assembly. Finally, who should convoke this meeting and decide where to hold it?

Amidst so many perplexities, the Brothers were like sheep without a shepherd, without a guide or counselor, like an orphaned family that has just lost its father. Thus, nothing was done. Inaction and consternation reigned. The Brothers looked at each other and did not know what to say. They could not reassure each other nor come to any definite conclusions. Each one expected someone else to take the lead and give an order about what should be done. To whom should they address the account of their conduct which the Rule prescribed

every two months, an essential practice for the good of the Institute? Who should take the responsibility of replying to their letters? Who should arrange for new schools, change the Brothers from one place to another, correct the indocile, admit postulants, send away those who were unfit? Who should speak and act in all those matters? On all such points, nothing definite could be decided.

## Brother Barthélemy gradually fills the role of Superior

Eventually, the need to do something was brought home to the Brother who was at the head of those in Paris and who had been put in charge of the novitiate by De La Salle himself. He was Brother Barthélemy, a man of mild, docile, and discreet character. Everything would have remained in the same confused state if he had not acted. When people came asking for De La Salle, Brother Barthélemy was the one who had to deal with them. A number of letters addressed to the Founder required prompt answers; someone had to give them. Thus, little by little and without set purpose, he found himself handling the Brothers' affairs and being considered as the Superior of the Brothers in De La Salle's absence, not through a formal election but by tacit consent and unspoken approval.

Since De La Salle had put Brother Barthélemy in charge of the novitiate, it was presumed that he would have appointed him to take his place if he had thought such a measure necessary. Moreover, if the Brothers had met to elect someone, he would certainly have been their choice. He was virtuous, loved by all, and highly regarded, and as he was such a peaceable man, it was felt that his government would be peaceable also. In this they were not mistaken. In those very difficult times, he adopted the wisest measures to insure that De La Salle's absence would not cause the Institute the harm that could have been feared. If he was not able to avoid all harm, he did prevent most of it. His conduct was such that the inconveniences that did occur were easy to rectify after the holy Founder's return and even after his death. Nevertheless, he met with some opposition at first from certain unruly members who were not displeased at living without any Superior and who tried to disguise their disobedience under the pretext that they did not wish to recognize any Superior other than De La Salle or that the Brother who was acting in his place had neither been designated by him nor elected in a regular assembly.

Brother Barthélemy did not take umbrage at their opposition. He agreed that their hesitation in recognizing him in the role of Superior was well founded and that it was indeed possible to question his right

to the title as long as no one knew for sure whether De La Salle was alive or as long as he himself had not been given this position by a canonical election. Thus, he was governing more like an elder brother who during his father's absence was taking care of the family rather than like a true Superior. This wise, humble, and moderate attitude won him all hearts and gave him full authority. Two or three rebels were the only ones who refused to submit to him. The humble Brother endured them patiently, but as their disobedience led to disorderly conduct on their part, the principal Brothers resolved to make an example of them so that the scandal might not go any further. They had a meeting, therefore, and dismissed those proud religious, who later on might have spread to others the mortal poison of their independent spirit and thus occasioned even greater disorders.

## Brother Barthélemy errs by being too accommodating

The only mistake Brother Barthélemy made, without realizing it, was to listen to the pernicious advice given him by De La Salle's great rival. That man allowed him to take the place of the absent Superior without offering any opposition. He himself would have chosen Brother Barthélemy as Superior, if he had the right to appoint anyone, for he felt that since this virtuous disciple lacked the insight, firmness, and strength of mind of the Founder, he would be able to use him for his own purposes and bring him around to what he desired. Here are the means he took to succeed in his plan.

The conniver stayed in the background and did not appear openly. If he spoke, it was through the lips of another. When he acted, it was by another's hand. I mean that he operated through a cleric entirely devoted to him who lent himself to whatever his master wished. This tool, who allowed himself to be manipulated in all things by his master, tried in every way possible to get Brother Barthélemy to consent to something that De La Salle—who saw through him more clearly—would never have been willing to accept. It was to drop from the Rule of the Institute a number of customs and practices and to give it a new form of government, along with new regulations and new superiors.

The agent that the enemy made use of[27] was just the sort of individual he needed for the role. He was an upright man but not too clever; he had much virtue but little sense. He showed great zeal for

27. This priest was M. de Brou, not a Sulpician but connected with that community and especially with De La Chétardie.

what was good, but he did not understand what was best for a community. In other words, he was a man with considerable influence, thanks to his birth and family connections, but though a worthy ecclesiastic, he was so completely won over to the other's ideas that he could see only through the eyes of the other and acted only on his advice. The rival knew that his man was ready to move in whatever direction he wanted him to, and he intended to use him to control the Brothers. In this he succeeded, because by means of the virtuous ecclesiastic, he got Brother Barthélemy to go along with his system.

## The rival of De La Salle plans to change the Institute

The main points of the proposed organization were these: 1) the Brothers should have superiors from outside the Community, men capable of directing them something like the external superiors who direct nuns; 2) the house in Paris should form a separate entity and should depend entirely on the ecclesiastical superior; 3) the novitiate should be suppressed as a useless burden; it cost too much to educate and feed all the novices; moreover, there was no need for so many in Paris, since the Brothers should remain fixed in the schools where they taught, as will be explained below; 4) the Brothers should stay in one place and not be changed from house to house; 5) to fill the gaps made by those who died or left or who had to be dismissed for misconduct, it was proposed to have one, two, or three novices, more or less, in each house, according to its revenues and its personnel needs; 6) finally, a new form of government was to be set up, but about this we have no definite information.

Such a system, as is evident and as will be shown in a moment, would have turned the Institute topsy-turvy, along with all its laws and its customs. It would have obliterated the name of De La Salle. In ten years' time, it would have thoroughly destroyed all he had worked for: so thoroughly, in fact, that no one would have known why the former canon of Reims had left his native city, his family, his canonry, and all his goods nor what he had accomplished in the Church. In short, the scheme tended to make of the Brothers' Society a series of little splinter groups, lacking subjection to a common chief and depending only on the local superiors, something like the many communities of schoolmistresses which are being multiplied in France today and which each bishop establishes or allows to be established for his particular diocese.

But why this insistence on breaking up the Congregation of the Brothers into houses unconnected with each other and subordinated

to no central authority? Would it not have been more natural and more flattering to pride to make himself the head of the whole Society rather than of the Paris group alone? No doubt, the former solution would have been more flattering to self-love, but it was not possible. The Founder's rival could perhaps captivate and keep dependent on himself the Brothers in Paris; he had at his disposal the means necessary to do so. But his power did not extend any farther. He knew that the other Brothers would not have been willing to acknowledge him as their Superior or to obey him. In addition, if he had undertaken to govern all the Brothers, he would have had to assume the responsibility of providing for them, something he was not prepared to undertake; the Brothers often had to suffer privations during times of public calamities. Finally, he would have had to keep up the novitiate De La Salle had started. That would require a good deal of money, too, and he did not venture to underwrite such a heavy expense. So, out of necessity, he had to limit himself to the scheme outlined above.

To get Brother Barthélemy to agree to the plan, De La Salle's rival took the quickest way. He had the Brothers' salaries cut off, and they had to go on starvation rations and were in need of everything. When they went to collect the money due them or even to ask for charity, they were told to apply to Monsieur . . . , a very religious and generous priest, who would surely come to their help. They were also advised to show much confidence in him, even to choose him for their Superior. They were assured that they would find in him a firm resource in all their needs and that he was another De La Salle. The Brothers, however, were in no hurry to follow his advice. They were wary and rightly so. They had not lost hope of seeing their father again, and they feared that if he returned and found his place occupied by some stranger, he might decide to give up the whole matter permanently.

However, the virtuous ecclesiastic whom we have just mentioned was an outstanding man in many ways. He sought only what was good, even when he let himself be manipulated by De La Salle's enemy. He often came to visit the Brothers in his role as their ecclesiastical superior. He called himself such, hoping that the Brothers would eventually give him the position, and he urged them to do so. This cleric said that he wanted to be the Brothers' protector, benefactor, and father. He promised to use his influence in their favor and to bestow on them his services and his liberalities. They could have had all his help, in fact, if they had been willing to put him in De La Salle's place; by reserving to the Brothers the liberal alms he bestowed in

other directions, he would have made them quite rich. By dint of the favors and benefactions which he gave the Brothers when they were in need, he accustomed them to allowing him the title which he had first assumed by his own accord—in other words, to calling him their Superior, since the term pleased him so much.

## A clerical Superior with no election by the Brothers

It was not merely the name, however, but the reality and the rights attached to the position that he was really after. He wanted the Brothers to call him their Superior and to act toward him with the spirit of dependence that becomes inferiors. That was more difficult for him to obtain. After all, words are cheap, and nobody ever went bankrupt by making compliments. What this ecclesiastic wanted from the Brothers was not an empty title but real jurisdiction and complete authority. Fully aware of the situation of the Brothers, in order to make his election more rapid and certain, he decided to suspend all his alms in their favor and to have the Brothers' salaries held back. He succeeded in making the Brothers suffer a great deal and undergo a veritable famine, but he did not succeed in getting them to choose him as Superior in due form. In the meantime, he tried to exercise authority which had not yet been given him. He would not allow Brother Barthélemy to admit postulants without his permission, and he took it upon himself to send candidates away; according to the system he wanted to introduce, only three or four novices were to be kept. That was an infallible way to destroy the Institute, because if the measure had been kept in effect for any length of time, the Institute would not have been able to survive.

That was the situation De La Salle found when he finally returned from Provence; there were then only three or four young men in the novitiate. Brother Barthélemy no longer counted. He had let himself be captivated and dominated by the person of whom we speak. If he had wanted to take in a larger number of novices, he could not have done so, because he had been deprived of the means of providing for them. He did not, like De La Salle, possess the secret of finding resources in the treasury of our heavenly Father.

That was the total of what De La Salle's rival had then been able to accomplish through the instrumentality of his agent. In spite of his efforts, the pseudo-superior made no headway in the area where he really wanted to dictate. Some of the older Brothers, who loved Brother Barthélemy, resisted vigorously and encouraged each other not to give in. They were willing to give the title of Superior to the man who

seemed so eager to have it and who bestowed it upon himself, but the title, without the corresponding authority, did not satisfy him. The cleric even took occasion of their calling him such to try to extract real authority from the Brothers. *You call me your Superior*, he told them one day, *but you should show concretely that I am really such*. And for fear that the Brothers might seem to misunderstand his words, he added *that he wanted a formal statement drawn up which, after being signed by the Brothers, would be included in the house register*.

That was an important point which would affect the very essence of the Institute. Foreseeing that some such circumstance might arise, De La Salle had bound the Brothers, as we related above, to decide that they would elect as Superior no one but one of themselves after his death. In doing so, what he had in mind when he wished to give up his position as Superior was to oblige the Brothers to choose someone from among their ranks to succeed him. The point seemed so essential to De La Salle that he wished to see it put into effect while he still lived, so that once he was dead, there might not be any difficulty about it. It was, therefore, very important that the Brothers not yield to the proposal made by their protector. We must blame the lack of firmness displayed by Brother Barthélemy in agreeing to it. He did what was asked of him out of complaisance. After De La Salle returned, however, the page was torn out of the register in order to do away with the record of the mistake.

## Brother Barthélemy is urged to introduce the new government

Having led the Brothers to the first stage, the ecclesiastic wanted to push them even farther so as to carry out his plan. He did not explain himself, and he spoke of his scheme only in monosyllables. He wished to prepare their minds and to win them over to his project before explaining it clearly. He made great promises. He offered to put them in possession of an endowed house. But he always added a *but*, a condition which he implied without stating it plainly.

Finally, whether he thought that his time had come or whether he wished to feel out their reactions, on one occasion he proposed the new form of government. One of the articles stated that each house of the Institute would train its own candidates. A second specified that the relationships between the houses would be discontinued. A third was the conclusion of the previous one, namely, that the house in Paris would be a unit unto itself. He was not listened to. To avoid an argument, the Brothers respectfully answered that before deciding, they needed to get the opinions and consent of the Brothers in the

provinces. The good Brothers congratulated themselves on having parried the thrust. They thought they had won, but they were deceived by the simplicity or the exaggerated complaisance of Brother Barthélemy, who did not see the consequences of the step he was being asked to take.

The person of whom we are speaking was himself an upright man who meant no evil, but the one who was manipulating him and whom he served so well was a crafty person who knew how to open doors that had been shut in his face. His suggestion was to get Brother Barthélemy to write to the Directors of the various houses, asking them to look for an outside superior capable of directing them and of taking care of their affairs. If Brother Barthélemy were to fall into this trap, the cunning Achitophel would have managed to make acceptable in another way the proposals that had been rejected, and in spite of the Brothers' refusal, he would have succeeded in introducing a new type of government, thus succeeding in his designs.

To fool Brother Barthélemy about the essential matter, to get him not only to subscribe to it himself but even to promote its execution and to be the one to bring it about, he was told how much he was to be pitied for being in charge of a work so difficult to direct that he was laden with a weight which De La Salle himself had not been able to bear and which he had finally got rid of; that this responsibility was heavier for him than for the Founder, since he did not have his character, authority, or experience and did not find among the Brothers the same affection, docility, and trust.

He was told that if he did not wish to be crushed by the burden that had overwhelmed De La Salle himself, he needed to secure the backing of the authority of a number of clergymen, persons of influence in the places where the Brothers were established, and to turn over to outside superiors the greater part of his responsibilities; that such superiors, thanks to their prestige, would be able to maintain regularity among the Brothers, reduce the indocile to obedience, and bring back to the path of duty those who were inclined to take too much liberty; that he would never manage without their help to control men who could with impunity throw off the yoke of obedience.

Although specious, the advice seemed wise to Brother Barthélemy, who did not foresee its consequences. He did not even dream of suspecting that any motive other than charity had inspired it. He thanked those who thus counseled him and asked them how he could put their suggestions into effect. The means for doing so were at hand. Brother Barthélemy had reached the point where they wanted him, and only one further step was needed. It was not difficult.

He was told that he should write to all the houses of the Institute and persuade the Brothers to select for themselves an outside superior who would be able to govern and uphold them during the absence of De La Salle, of whom nothing had been heard for so long. At the same time, Brother Barthélemy was promised that his letters would be endorsed by others having greater weight. In fact, Brother Barthélemy's letters were accompanied by those from a highly regarded abbé, which gave them greater efficacy.

Soon De La Salle had, on every side, a multitude of vicars to function in the role of superior. Instead of one Superior, the Institute had as many superiors as there were distinct establishments. Thus, the system so long planned by the secret rival of De La Salle, which he had not previously succeeded in implementing, finally was a fait accompli. He had labored during ten years to have it accepted, but each time he had tried to impose it, he had met with confusion. Now the time was ripe to put his plan into effect, and he did not fail to seize it. The lengthy absence of the holy Founder had encouraged his adversary to set his project in motion again and to get it accepted. It had been proposed earlier to the Brothers and immediately rejected by them, but guile succeeded where authority had failed. The scheme was presented under a disguised form; it was given a different appearance. Under a deceitful mask, it was agreed to, at least by the one who was acting as Superior.

That was as far as the adversary of the holy Founder was able to go, but no farther. At that point, when the Institute should have been fragmented, naturally speaking, it was the new system that failed and came to nothing. All the storms of previous persecutions, like the waves of a tumultuous sea, soon died down and were quelled. To put the virtue of his servant to a final test, God willed to give to his enemy what looked like complete victory and to De La Salle the mortification of witnessing what looked like the certain and imminent ruin of his Institute when the new form of government was introduced.

That crisis was probably the bitterest pill that the servant of God ever had to swallow in all his life. But he had to endure only the bitterness, and he thereby won the merit of his patience and submission to God's orders. After testing this new Job in all manner of ways—by the loss of his goods and of his spiritual children, by infirmities and painful illnesses, by outrages and continual persecution, and at last by the sorrow of seeing his life work on the brink of destruction—the Almighty gave him back a new family, re-established his Institute, made it more flourishing than ever, and in the end, rendered it secure and unshakable.

For the God who had permitted the evil to occur had also prepared the remedy for it. He inspired the new superiors with the right attitude they needed to adopt, in the absence of De La Salle, with regard to his Institute. They limited themselves to declaring that they were its protectors and guardians, while leaving to the Directors of the houses and the Brother who acted as Superior all their rights. They upheld their authority, helped to put superiors and inferiors into communication with each other, and, in a word, did what De La Salle himself would have done if he had been able to be present in each diocese.[28]

## Disorders that could come from this new form of government

Some of the new local superiors, realizing the dangerous consequences that this new type of organization could lead to, did their best to have it rescinded. They warned Brother Barthélemy that he should take steps to secure a revocation and suggested to him ways of doing so. Also, those who were interested in the welfare of the Institute and who had kept a high regard for De La Salle were deeply alarmed by the strange innovations and feared lest the Christian Schools might come to an end with the one who had founded them. A number of the principal Brothers, more enlightened than the others, more familiar with the nature of their Institute and with the right way of governing it, complained aloud about the new system, asserting that the service some people claimed to be doing the Society was really a mortal blow to it.

What, they asked, is the purpose of this new type of arrangement that is being introduced? Do they want to deprive the Founder of the right to govern his Institute, so that when he returns, he will find the doors of all the houses closed to him, houses that he himself founded? Is the idea merely to sustain the Brothers during his absence and keep them true to his spirit, to keep watch over the Institute, as it were, so that on his return, he may find it just as he left it? Do they want to give his creation a more appropriate form, correct its defects, and consolidate its foundations, or do they want to create a new Institute on the ruins of the old? No matter how these changes are presented, they still amount to pernicious novelties, born of malice or at least dreamed up by mistaken zeal.

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28. Blain himself was one of these ecclesiastical superiors, assisting the Brothers in Rouen.

## Brother Barthélemy is shown how to nip the evil in the bud

All this—and more, which we omit—was told to Brother Barthélemy by several of the principal Brothers and even by some of the ecclesiastical superiors chosen in the various dioceses to replace the absent Founder. Those men, clear-sighted and full of concern for the Institute of the Christian Schools, regretted that such evil counsels had been followed and offered their help to limit the damage that was bound to result. Their role placed De La Salle's Institute in their hands, so to speak. It would have been easy for them to dismember it, piece by piece, in accordance with the new plan of reorganization and to take the leadership of that section committed to each of them. They could have made themselves the heads of those little individual congregations and have won for themselves, very cheaply, the title of founders by making new regulations and introducing new practices contrary to the intention of the true Founder. It was thus, apparently, that the authors of the new system had hoped to hoodwink the local superiors. But whatever may have been their true intentions, the Almighty, who allowed the project to be suggested, did not allow it to be carried out.

To put a stop to the disintegration of the Institute, three or four steps were suggested to Brother Barthélemy. The first was to undertake a general visitation of all the establishments, to win over by kind and gentle persuasion the Director and the Brothers in each house and to convince them not to interrupt the contacts they had with him and their connection with the body of the Society. The second was to prevail on them not to involve the outside superiors in any but external affairs and in those where their protection might be needed. The third recommendation was to call these ecclesiastics protectors, not superiors. The fourth and final suggestion was to call a general assembly of the principal Brothers at Saint Yon during the vacation period, in order to deliberate on the general welfare of the Institute, to make a fervent retreat together, to be renewed in spirit, and then, in the absence of De La Salle, to choose a Superior and to stipulate that the outside Superior would be considered only as a protector, to be dealt with in the same way that at Rome religious orders deal with their Cardinal Protector, who is assigned to them to favor them with their powerful influence.

Those of the superiors who had given such advice were the first to conform thereto. They refused to perform any act of jurisdiction in regard to the Brothers. They would not even assist at their meetings nor concern themselves with the internal affairs of the communities. They limited themselves to giving advice when asked, and beyond

that, they left the Brothers free to be governed by their acting Superior and kept for themselves only the right of being helpful on occasion. The remarkable thing, which shows that God's hand was on De La Salle's Community, was that all the other superiors did of their own accord—or rather by divine inspiration—what those we have been speaking of had suggested. They all considered themselves simply as the protectors of the Brothers and did not try to interfere in any way in their manner of living. What difficulties did arise among the Brothers were not due to these ecclesiastics but to the new system itself which the enemies wanted to introduce.

It did cause some disturbance among Brothers of differing personalities: the tepid and the fervent, the docile and the rebellious. Many did not know what to think under the circumstances. Some bewailed the absence of De La Salle, as if it were the cause of all the trouble; others longed for his return, considering it the only remedy for the sorry state of the Institute. Some, despairing of seeing either the remedy or the liberator, were tempted to leave an Institute which was being so profoundly modified that it was, in fact, becoming a different one altogether. Others were glad to camouflage the reasons for their departure by their complaints over what was happening. In the end, several did leave, among them some of the older and better members. They were weary of being forever in an uncertain and unstable situation. But most who left turned away from their state as schoolmasters only because they thought that they were being urged to give up their vocation as Brothers.

## De La Salle is finally advised of the disorders

From every side, letters were written to De La Salle about all this. The writers earnestly reproached him for his absence. Most of the letters were wrongly addressed, because his whereabouts were not known. Hence the letters never reached him. But one letter would have been enough to tell him more than he wanted to know. He was finally informed, and the news afflicted him grievously. Of all the letters which the Brothers and those interested in the welfare of the Institute sent him, a few did get through and apprised him of the disorder and trouble that his enemies had succeeded in introducing into the Society and the decadence which threatened it unless he himself returned without delay to sustain it with the same hands that had laid its foundations. This bad news was, in the divine counsels, the greatest trial that God had in store for him. On learning the true situation, this second Job submitted to the orders of God, adored his incomprehensible

designs, blessed his holy name, and abandoned himself to his adorable will. Yet he did not let himself lose courage. He hoped against hope, like Abraham, being convinced that if God so willed, he could bring forth new children for him out of the very stones and raise the Institute up again, making it more flourishing than ever. *God be blessed*, he said. *If this is his work, he will take care of it.*

His trust in God was not in vain. Other more comforting letters began to arrive, informing him that the situation was not quite so desperate as it had at first been represented; that God had succeeded in drawing good from evil in favor of the Institute; that the local superiors had acted as fathers and protectors for the Brothers, helping them with their advice and encouraging them to observe their Rule without interfering in the internal affairs or the domestic government of the various houses; that some of the superiors had advised Brother Barthélemy about what was not going well, so that he might remedy it, so great was their unwillingness to violate the rights of the acting Superior or to cause more difficulty in the houses; that some Brothers, in fact, had approached them to get their help in personal problems, but as that might have adversely affected the general good, they had wisely told them to take such matters up with their superiors, who were the rightful judges in such cases. When De La Salle returned, he would have the satisfaction of learning that the new system of government had not led to any unfortunate consequences.

It would seem that the unrest that was pervading the Institute, especially the Brothers in Paris, as a result of his absence should have made De La Salle decide to return there and set everything straight. However, convinced that he was more fit to destroy than to build up and that God did not need him to protect his work, the Founder thought only of remaining hidden, even more than he had been thus far. All the arguments which filled the letters sent to him to get him to leave his solitude were not enough to convince him. He did not even answer the letters that the Brothers wrote him on the subject, hoping to accustom them to forget him entirely and to discourage them by his obstinate silence.

## The Brothers order De La Salle to return, and he obeys

His strategy, however, did not succeed. The more he wanted to be forgotten, the more the Brothers thought of him and realized that they could no longer live without him. His long absence had taught them how dear he ought to be to them and how necessary his return was. They importuned him unceasingly and wearied him by their letters.

Finally, seeing that all such appeals were useless, they hit upon one means which would prove effective in making him come back. Since he paid no attention to their desires, their tears, and their prayers, they considered the idea of sending him an order and of commanding him to return. The expedient was a bold one with no precedent. The very fact of giving him an order seemed to be an infringement of his legitimate authority which they were bound to respect. But what else could they do? Necessity knows no law, says the proverb, and charity sometimes makes us take extraordinary steps. If on this occasion the sons gave orders to their father, it was only so that they might obey him again. If the disciples prescribed a law to their master, it was only because they wanted to be ruled by him.

The principal Brothers of Paris, Versailles, and Saint-Denis held a meeting and agreed to write him a letter in the name of the entire Institute. In it, after trying to convince him by invoking the most tender and touching arguments, they ordered him, in the name of the obedience which he, as they, had vowed to the Institute, to come back to Paris without delay. Their missive, couched in simple and straightforward language, shows so evidently the esteem and veneration they entertained for their holy Founder and their fear of losing him that it suffices to quote it in full to refute everything that his enemies ever said about the harshness of his government and the stubbornness with which he was reproached.

"Monsieur, our very dear father, we, the principal Brothers of the Christian Schools, having in view the greater glory of God, the greater good of the Church and of our Society, recognize that it is of the utmost importance that you should again take up the care and general government of the holy work of God, which is also yours, since it has pleased the Lord to make use of you to establish it and to direct it for such a long time. Everyone is convinced that God gave you and still gives you the graces and talents needed to govern properly this new Company which is so useful to the Church, and it is only just for us to acknowledge that you have always governed it with much success and edification. This is why, Monsieur, we very humbly beseech you and command you in the name and on behalf of the body of this Society to which you have promised obedience to take up permanently the responsibility for the government of our Society. In testimony of which, we have signed, done at Paris this first day of April 1714. We are, with most profound respect, Monsieur, our dear father, your humble and obedient inferiors, . . ."

In my opinion, this letter is an outstanding testimonial to De La Salle's exceptional virtue. The Brothers must have had a very high

idea of the humility and obedience of their Founder to dare to write him in that way and to believe that he would be willing to submit to a command which was certainly out of place in the mouths of those who issued it. The Brothers would have been inexcusable if their simplicity and their need had not authorized such a step. A man less humble than their Superior would have been irritated and shocked by such imperious language, and he would have taken his revenge by maintaining a profound silence or by sending a sharp reply. But the Brothers never feared anything of the sort. They knew the character of their Superior too well to have any doubts. In all circumstances, he had given them such extraordinary examples of humility and obedience that they felt they had a right to expect this one also and even to require it of him. They were right.

Nevertheless, such an extraordinary letter at first surprised the servant of God. If he had not recognized the signatures of the Brothers, he might have suspected that it had been forged or that it was a pious stratagem invented by some of those most zealous for the Institute and most closely attached to his person. But though unable to question the genuineness of the letter, he was stunned as he read it, not sure whether he should blame the boldness of those who had written it or praise the zeal which had inspired it. The various thoughts which passed through his mind as he read the letter finally led him to defer to his inferiors and to give them, once again, an outstanding example of submission and dependence, since that was what they expected of him.

On learning of his decision, some friends opposed it as strongly as they could, but he replied that he had to obey. Whom do you wish to obey? they inquired. Have you a Superior in your Community? I want to obey the Brothers, he replied. They are commanding me to return to Paris. A strange reversal of roles, they exclaimed. The legislator receives the law from those for whom he made it! In vain did they strive to convince him that he had no orders to take from his inferiors, his sons who were simple Brothers, while he was their Superior and father, a priest and Founder. Nothing could swerve him from his resolve, however; he reiterated it, declaring *that after having taught obedience for so long by words, it was only right for him to begin teaching it by deed.*

This humble maxim reduced his friends to silence. They were as much edified as surprised. They congratulated the Brothers on having a Superior who gave them such an example; they could not doubt that an Institute founded on such heroic acts of virtue was indeed the work of God and would emerge gloriously from the abyss of crosses

and persecutions in which it seemed to have been swallowed up, ready to perish.

Abbé de Saléon, today the bishop of Agen, and Monsieur Didier, a canon of Saint Laurent, who was kind enough to add to his title of the Brothers' protector that of their confessor, were the ones who felt the deepest sorrow over the fact that they were about to lose their holy friend. The Visitandines of the monastery in Grenoble also showed their profound regret. It was in their church that the holy priest had chosen to say Mass, and the degree of devotion and piety he showed while offering the Holy Sacrifice had taught them to know and to honor him. The dignity with which he officiated at the altar used to attract nearly all these religious to his Mass, although it was not their community Mass.

After saying his farewells in the city, the servant of God spent the last night before his departure in prayer, recommending to God his journey and the Brothers of the house which had sheltered him. Before leaving, he noticed that one of them had some little clash with the Brother Director. He hastened to smooth it over and left them all in peace after exhorting them, like a new Saint Barnabas, to persevere in union, charity, fidelity to their vocation, the spirit of retirement, and avoidance of the world. It is easy to understand how distressed the Brothers were over the separation. It was all the more grievous for them, since they knew they would never see him again.

De La Salle took the route through Lyon. After he arrived there, his devotion led him to the tomb of Saint Francis de Sales, where he remained in prayer for an hour to obtain from God the spirit of that great saint and his protection for his Institute. Some of the people that he knew and went to visit in the city wished to keep him with them for a while, but he excused himself by saying that obedience made it imperative for him to return to Paris as soon as possible. From Lyon he proceeded to Dijon, where the Brothers welcomed him with joy mingled with sadness because of the short time he could spend with them to console them for his long absence. Finally, he arrived in Paris on 10 August 1714.

# CHAPTER XIII

*The manner in which De La Salle returns to Paris and is received there; he suffers new affronts; he delivers a possessed man.*

De La Salle had come back to Paris at the voice of obedience. He made his appearance there like an inferior and said to the Brothers when he met them, *Here I am; what do you want of me?* The Brothers were seized with astonishment and could say only that they wanted him to take up again the general conduct of the Institute. The holy priest objected that since the work had been preserved during his absence by the almighty hand which had begun it, his help was not needed. He added that they should suppose him dead and act as though he were no longer in this world. He stated that he was resolved to live thenceforth as a private individual, a status to which Providence had led him by secret paths; that having tasted the joy of living without the burden of responsibility for others, he could not bring himself to reassume such an onerous duty; that it was time to think of choosing a Superior General who, by ruling wisely, could repair the harm he himself had done.

That was the direction in which the holy Founder wanted to lead the Brothers. He had already tried several times to convince them of it, even in the early days of the Society, but his humility had never succeeded in overcoming the inflexibility of his sons on this point. Now his project had more than one aim in view. Besides his great love of dependency which constantly urged him to take the last place, he wanted to introduce into the Society before he died and to authorize by his example the form of government which should remain in force after him.

De La Salle feared that at his death, an attempt might be made to put at the head of the Brothers a Superior who was not a member of the body of their Society. It was to forestall such an eventuality, which he regarded as the ruination of the Congregation, that he had even bound the Brothers by a vow (as was pointed out above) to choose a Superior from among themselves as soon as possible after his death. His fears were not idle ones. As we have seen, after ten years of intrigues to set up an outsider as superior in Paris, his enemy had finally succeeded. To make sure this situation did not perpetuate itself, De La Salle thought it essential to elect one of the Brothers as Superior, so as to make any outside Superior who might appoint himself to the

position entirely superfluous and put the Community in a position to conduct its own affairs in its own way without external interference.

This was what the Founder wanted to see during his lifetime so that when he was dying, he might hope that his departure from this world would not introduce any changes in the Brothers' way of governing themselves. He was afraid that if the Brothers failed during his life to exercise their right to govern themselves, as all other Congregations do, they might definitively lose the prerogative after his death. All his efforts were again of no avail. He could not win his disciples' consent to his stepping down, although he had been seeking to do so for so many years. They had not made him come back in order to remove him from office. Anybody else in his place would never be to their liking. They could not get along without him nor withdraw from his authority. So they all knelt at his feet to show him their respect and their submission to his orders.

The servant of God, once again deprived of what he so desired, retired to his poor cell with a heart full of sadness because he could not escape a burden which had become so wearisome for him and which he thought he no longer had to bear. The release which he had been trying to obtain for so long and for which he offered constant prayers to God was finally granted to him, but only two years later. During this interval, however, he kept only the title of Superior and let Brother Barthélemy take care of the details of administration. The latter did nothing without consulting him, yet the servant of God did not even wish to direct the house or preside over the spiritual exercises.

What he did keep in his hands was the exercise of his sacred ministry, which he could not hand over to any Brother. He said Mass for the Brothers, heard their confessions, and on Sundays and feasts, gave them a spiritual exhortation lasting half an hour. The rest of the time, he remained in his room—praying, reading Holy Scripture and other pious books, and composing spiritual treatises for the benefit of his sons. His manner of acting disappointed the Brothers somewhat. They felt that they had him back only in part and regretted not being able to profit more fully by his presence. But they dissimulated their displeasure for fear of causing him any grief. Moreover, they hoped that they would bring him around, little by little, to what they desired.

As the eternal counsels decreed that every day of the holy man's life should be marked by the cross, it was not long before he encountered new humiliations. His great enemy no longer lived; God had called him while the servant of God was still at Grenoble.[29] The

29. De La Chétardie died on 29 June 1714.

news of the death which he received there had hastened his return to Paris; he would not have dared to come back if that man were still alive. He stated this to some of the Brothers he trusted. But his powerful adversary, although no longer living, had left behind him people who inherited his views and his prejudices against the servant of God.

## The ecclesiastical superior puts questions to De La Salle

One of these people affected to be highly scandalized because De La Salle continued to hear the Brothers' confessions, believing that he was not authorized to do so. His intemperate zeal over this pretended irregularity drew from him expressions of shocked surprise which he made known to Brother Barthélemy. He even went so far as to question De La Salle about it. The latter allayed his astonishment on this score but caused him even greater amazement when he showed him the extensive faculties he had received from His Eminence when Cardinal de Noailles first became archbishop of Paris and which were granted without any time limit. The ecclesiastic in question was all the more astounded at the authorization, because he did not know of anyone else who had received such ample powers and because he himself did not enjoy anything like the same privilege, although his rank and birth might have made it seem that he should.

Not being able to harass the holy priest on this point, he initiated a quarrel with him on another, God permitting all this for the greater perfection of his servant. The person of whom we speak was really devoted to what was good, and his virtue was even superior to his high rank. At the same time, he was imbued with the false ideas of his deceased master and seems to have wanted to cause that man's animosity against the holy priest to revive in him. Always seeking some way to cause trouble, he was not happy over the holy Founder's return to Paris and did not know how he could get him to leave again. It may be that the presence of the servant of God cast him and his title as Superior of the Brothers in the shade, or perhaps he wanted to go ahead with the execution of the new scheme of government and realized that it had no chance of succeeding as long as De La Salle was on the scene. Whatever may have been his motive, he wrote a memorandum and sent it to De La Salle, demanding a reply.

## The questions put De La Salle in an embarrassing situation

These were the questions he wanted answered promptly and precisely: Who will henceforth be the Superiors of the Community of the

Brothers? What vows will the Brothers make? Who should be contacted when new foundations are to be established? What salary will be required? What will be the rules of the Society?

These questions were insidious and ticklish, especially the first one, on which the rest depended. The servant of God could not answer without furnishing new weapons to his adversaries and walking into the trap laid for him. If he answered that in the future the Superiors of the Community of the Brothers would henceforth be members of the Society, that they had to be Brothers and not priests or outsiders, his opponents would have found fault with all such terms. They would have argued that he himself was bringing in an innovation and changing the original organization of the Society, since he, although a priest, was its Superior and had been since the beginning.

They would have taxed him with pride and singularity because he wanted to be the only one of his kind, so to speak, and did not wish that the Community should ever have another priest as Superior after him. They would have accused him of narrow-minded and eccentric thinking because he felt that the Congregation would be better governed by simple Brothers without learning or culture than by enlightened and scholarly clerics. They would have faulted him for condemning what had just been done so successfully and for objecting to the naming of ecclesiastical superiors for the Brothers in their various houses. That would have meant deeply wounding the author of the memorandum, who had been the primary instigator of this undertaking. Finally, it would have meant telling the ecclesiastic that he was not recognized as the superior of the Brothers in Paris and that he was usurping a title that nobody had a right to give him.

If De La Salle had replied that the Superiors of the Community of the Brothers in the future would be priests like himself, like those who had been appointed in the various dioceses, 1) he would have approved the new form of government which his enemies were trying to introduce, had in fact introduced, and which he considered as a calamity and a source of the total ruination of his Institute; 2) he would have excluded himself from the Society and given his enemies legitimate pretexts for driving him from it; they might have asked him why he had returned to Paris, since there was already an ecclesiastical superior there; 3) he would have destroyed what he had built; he would have encouraged the Brothers to violate the vow which he had inspired them to make, namely, to choose after his death neither priest nor outsider as Superior but only a Brother from their own ranks.

It is certain that the ecclesiastic had no rights and no semblance of authority over De La Salle. The latter could have refused to reply

and have asked the questioner why he was meddling in what was none of his business. The servant of God was too humble to do anything of the sort. It is also quite certain that if De La Salle had brought the list of questions to Cardinal de Noailles, who had never authorized them and who did not look with such a favorable eye on those who were the authors, it would have drawn down his indignation on the intriguers. De La Salle was too wise to stir up such a tempest and too charitable to want to avenge himself on those who were eager to have a chance to cause him more trouble.

The simplest thing for him to do was to pay no attention to crafty questions, answering them only with silence. That he did not dare to do. Although the priest had no authority over him, he had usurped it over the Brothers, and they needed him. He could do them much good and also much harm. Thus humility, charity, and prudence made it a duty for him to reply. Humility always made him think of himself as the lowest of all and led him to abase himself before everybody and to submit to all as though they were his superiors, in the spirit of what the Apostles Saint Peter and Saint Paul taught their disciples. The man of God was so filled with humility that he never addressed the person of whom we speak except with deep respect. He dealt with him as with his superior. He received his corrections and often put up with his harsh and scornful treatment without being offended. Charity made it necessary for him to answer in order to parry the blows that the priest could aim at the Brothers. Finally, prudence also suggested a reply. The Founder needed to make his own position known; otherwise, his silence might have authorized more innovations.

Obviously, his quandary was considerable. The questions were artfully couched and designed only to entrap him in what he might say. Eventually, since he had to answer, he abandoned himself to the Spirit of God and responded in all simplicity what he felt God had inspired him with on each of the questions, except the first. His reply, forwarded to the one who expected it, only embittered more deeply a man who wanted to be embittered and who sought an occasion for an outburst against the servant of God. He appeared indignant that no answer had been given to the first question. That was the point on which he wanted a definite answer, because all the rest depended on it.

To satisfy him, the holy Founder should have replied that the Brothers in Paris would be governed by his opponent and by Messieurs ***.[30] Any other answer would have irritated him, for that was what he really wanted, to be named Superior by the Founder

himself, excluding the Founder in the process, and to have him hand over the Brothers in Paris to his full power and control. That was precisely what De La Salle feared and what he considered would be the complete subversion of his Society. The displeasure evinced by the priest in question worried him very deeply because he could foresee what would follow from it, but he did not let the matter upset him.

De La Salle left it all in God's hands and replied that he could not give any answer to the first question. At that time, there was really no one exercising the role of Superior. De La Salle, the real Superior, did not wish to act officially in any way. The Brothers had not chosen anybody else. It would not be until two years later that they finally elected Brother Barthélemy. Their persistent refusal to accept the resignation of their Founder and De La Salle's constancy in refusing to act as the Superior left everything up in the air. It seemed an excellent opportunity for the man who was trying to intrude himself into the Community to get the title of Superior for himself from the servant of God, so that he might then arrogate to himself the authority the title confers and thus complete the implementation of his new system of government.

Even if De La Salle had not had serious reasons to be cautious, prudence would not have allowed him to give any reply to the first question posed. For, as he said, if I put down in writing that the Community of the Brothers will be governed by ***, I will risk the displeasure of the archbishop of Paris. If I say that it will be subject to the prelate, I will draw down upon myself and the Brothers the ill will of these priests. Such weighty reasons prevented him from hazarding a response to the first article and from exposing himself to the disadvantages which must ensue. Consequently, he was punished for not replying, and the Brothers had to suffer the consequences. That was what De La Salle had feared, but he was prepared.

The person who was causing all the trouble had been clever enough to have the salaries of the Brothers placed in his hands. He was firmly resolved not to give them the money due them until De La Salle satisfied him by providing him with the answer he wanted. When the salaries fell due, he asked the Brothers who had come to collect them whether De La Salle had given his answer. The simple and straightforward Brothers said frankly that he had not, because he did not know what to respond. That was a new disappointment for a man who wanted the title of Superior from the lips of De La Salle

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30. The asterisks here and in what follows are all in the original, leaving open to speculation what the possible answers may have been.

himself and who had made up his mind to get it in exchange for the sum owed the Brothers. He refused to give them the money. De La Salle was not surprised at the refusal, because he had expected it. But the Brothers urged him to answer, pointing out the lack of funds in the house, and they did all they could to rouse him from the inaction in which he remained about the matter. But he still refused to reply, foreseeing that no matter what he said, there would be unfortunate consequences to contend with.

## The Brothers find a way out of the difficulty

As the Brothers could not get any response out of him on this point and as they were in pressing need, they decided to give an answer themselves, for they thought that a reply from them would not involve the same disadvantages as one coming from De La Salle, would secure for them the funds justly due them, and would deliver their Superior from the difficulty in which he had been for the past six weeks. Without going into the details of what happened on this occasion, suffice it to say that the Brothers found a way, if not to satisfy the author of the questions, at least to make him appear satisfied.

Here is the answer they gave in writing to the first question: *The Institute of the Brothers will be directed by Messieurs ***, who, in agreement with Messieurs ***, will select an ecclesiastical Superior.* Although they knew that this answer would not please him, they felt sure the inquisitor would have to be content with it, because he himself had given the Brothers the advice *that when some difficulty arises, they should get together, two or three of them, as the Gospel suggests, to resolve it.* Thus they felt he would approve whatever they decided in this manner. It also followed from his advice that since the Brothers had decided that it was not up to De La Salle to answer the question but up to them, there was no reason to keep insisting that De La Salle should do so.

Things turned out as the Brothers had foreseen. The priest read the paper and handed it back to them, smiling without any sign of displeasure. When the Brothers came home, they showed the paper to De La Salle and told him that the priest seemed satisfied. The holy Founder heaved a deep sigh and exclaimed, *My God, what a heavy weight you have removed from my heart!* The next day, a Brother went to collect the salaries, which were punctually paid, and that was the last that was heard of the business. Afterward, De La Salle was more firmly resolved than ever to abdicate his position, and he took even greater care not to exercise his authority in any way. He remained

nearly always in his room—praying, reading, and composing meditations for the use of the Brothers; other than that, he limited himself to hearing their confessions and to giving them spiritual conferences on Sundays and feasts.

## The story of the Chevalier d'Armestat

About a year after De La Salle returned to Paris, the Chevalier d'Armestat entered the novitiate of the Brothers. The young man belonged to an aristocratic German family and had served for several years in the emperor's army, under Prince Eugène. After the battle of Denain,[31] he left the army for unknown reasons. He passed through Lyon and stopped there for some time. During his stay in the city, the exorcism of a possessed woman was the current topic of conversation and excited the curiosity of people with nothing much to do. He, too, became curious to witness the spectacle and to learn whether what people said about diabolical possession was indeed true. Perhaps he simply wanted to make fun of the exorcism and of the simplemindedness of Catholics, who—as religious innovators claim—are too credulous about such matters. A Protestant like him was not apt to look upon the exorcism ceremony as anything but a charade to amuse people. As a soldier, he took pride in being an agnostic and in not believing in the existence of demons.

With such dispositions, he entered the church where the exorcism was being carried out. Salvation, which he received on entering, was a gift to him from the devil through the mouth of the possessed woman, a reward either of his curiosity or of his incredulity. He learned more about exorcism than he had wanted to know, because the possessed woman looked at him and, trembling with rage, told him, *You don't believe that there are any demons, but one day you will experience their fury.* Never was a man more surprised. If he had come to mock, he soon found matter for tears.

Struck by such a salutary truth that God was revealing to him through the father of lies, he pondered it seriously, and his reflections immediately led him to abjure Lutheranism and to take instructions in the Catholic and Roman faith. He lost no time. A few months later, he made his profession of faith before the archbishop of Lyon. He then proceeded to Paris, where the first thing he did was to put himself into the hands of a skillful director of conscience who could lead him

31. Where Marshall Villars defeated Prince Eugene in 1712, thus ending the War of the Spanish Succession.

to God and help him withdraw from his evil life. He was advised to consult a virtuous priest of the Community of Saint Sulpice, who recommended that he join the Community of De La Salle. He was received there on 8 October 1714 and the next day began following the exercises of the novitiate.

It would seem that the devil was waiting for him there to make him experience his fury, as foretold by the possessed woman. That was not so very difficult for the evil spirit to do, for during military service, the Chevalier had received several wounds which had been cured only through the application of the remedy called the *secret*. The wicked spirit, who had used his knowledge to cure a man who belonged to him, did not want him to continue to enjoy good health once he was converted. As soon as he entered the novitiate, the new convert began to feel excruciating pains all over his body . The violence of the pains brought tears to his eyes and made him heave deep groans. The Brothers, who were ignorant of the reasons for this, thought it was the result of his fervor and his sorrow for his past sins. Only on the next day did they discover the real motive for his sighs and tears.

When he did not appear at the community exercises, they went looking for him and found him in his bed, unconscious, unable to move, bathed in blood flowing from his wounds, which had reopened even though, before this, they had been so well healed that the scars were scarcely visible. All sorts of attentions were lavished on him, but the remedies did not revive him. He remained speechless and motionless. Fancying that he could not long survive, the Brothers had Extreme Unction administered to him. The sacrament had such a noticeable effect that his wounds immediately closed again, speech and consciousness returned, and he regained such good health that by the next day he was able to take part in the novitiate program once again.

His recovery did not last long, however. A few days later, he relapsed into a condition worse than the previous one. He lay unconscious, bereft of all sensation, and the only use he made of his senses and members was by horrible contortions. He vomited blood, and his eyes turned in their sockets as do those of a possessed person. Once in a while, he rested his gaze on a certain spot in the room, and his lips quivered as though he were addressing someone. Meanwhile, he moved his arms as though trying to ward off blows and to defend himself.

The Chevalier spent the night in extraordinary agitation, and no one could make him take any nourishment or even open his mouth.

Finally, he fell into a sort of coma that lasted four hours. During that time, he thought he saw a crowd of demons in horrible shapes which threatened to do away with him if he did not immediately give up the new type of life which he had just begun. The frightful sight evoked horrible grimaces in him, and he seemed so near death that everyone thought he was about to expire. Then he seemed to see the Most Blessed Virgin, to whom he had become very devout since his return to the true faith. Merely by her presence, she dissipated the infernal crew and comforted him.

As soon as he came back to his senses, he insistently begged to be given the habit of the Society, and his request was granted. The favor cost him dearly, for the devil seemed to consider the taking of the habit as a new insult and avenged himself by inflicting new torments on him. The infernal spirit seemed to seize him by the throat and to try to strangle him. The novice could not breathe and resembled a man who is choking to death. His tongue grew so thick that he could no longer articulate a word. However, even in this extremity, he did not lose consciousness. He received Holy Viaticum. As his life was despaired of, the Brothers gathered a short time later to recite the prayers for the dying. The paroxysms seemed to diminish during this interval, and by the time the prayers were ended, he looked as though he had revived.

But the devil still did not let go. Since by all the torments he had not been able to get his slave, who had escaped from his bondage, to give up his proposal, he had recourse to trickery. His imagination made the poor sick man think he saw De La Salle, Brother Barthélemy, and the priest who had advised him to enter the Community all standing over him and scourging him cruelly. Actually it was the devil who was punishing him in the form of those persons; whether in reality or only in imagination is hard to say. The fact is, nevertheless, that the novice suffered a great deal, and his pains were not at all imaginary. The evil spirit's trick was effective. He wanted to persuade the patient that he had found three torturers in those three virtuous persons. The novice became firmly persuaded that it was indeed so, and that idea almost caused his fall. The Brothers did everything they could to make him realize his mistake, and finally he recognized that it was all due to the malice of the wicked spirit. Once he was delivered from his false notion, his courage against Satan's attacks grew stronger, and the devil's efforts against him were renewed.

The struggle seems unbelievable. We would hardly dare affirm it in this century when nobody wants to admit anything that seems extraordinary, if we did not have as witnesses the Brothers who were

present at the entire scene. The devil, not having succeeded in tearing his vocation from the novice's heart, tore out all his toenails during one night. The Brothers saw the result the next morning and had to admit the evidence of what was before their eyes. That kind of testimony is not to be rejected, not even by those who claim to be skeptics. Like the Brothers, De La Salle, too, witnessed that happening as well as the others we have related. He had just come back from Grenoble, and for over six weeks he had done for this new convert, so cruelly assailed by hell, everything that the most tender charity could suggest.

Thinking over what he had seen, De La Salle remained convinced that it all indicated a case of true diabolical possession. But as he was wise and always proceeded in everything with the greatest circumspection, he did not want to create a great fuss about the matter. After all, there is no absolutely certain proof to be had in such cases, and it is easy to be mistaken. Hence he did not want to recite publicly the prayers that the Church prescribes for the deliverance of possessed people. De La Salle shut himself up in the sick man's room and recited over him the prayers and performed the ceremonies prescribed in such cases. They proved effective, and the novice was freed from the grasp of the devil, who up to then had not been willing to let go of his captive. From then on, the novice felt no more attacks of the evil spirit. Unfortunately, however, he did not remain faithful, and he did not persevere in his vocation.

## Chapter XIV

*De La Salle returns the novitiate to Saint Yon; he obeys when he is forbidden to return there himself but later is allowed to do so; there he occupies himself zealously training the novices; he finally persuades the Brothers to elect a successor and shows them how to do so; he retouches the Rules and gives them the form they have to this day.*

About that time, there occurred the death of King Louis XIV, which was a fresh subject of sorrow for De La Salle.[32] He wept over him, as did all good-thinking people, and he feared what would result for the

32. The "Sun King" died at Versailles on 1 September 1715.

Church and the state. That the two previous kings had ascended the throne as minors made everyone understand what could be expected from a third.

In Louis XIV, the Institute had a staunch protector, for His Majesty had always granted everything that had been asked in favor of the Christian Schools. The religious-minded prince had just decided to found a school at Fontainebleau with a grant of 500 livres for two Brothers, but his project was never carried out. The Church suffered a great loss by the death of a king even more redoubtable to heresy than to neighboring monarchs. De La Salle's concern for the Church was even greater than his concern for his Community. Indeed, it was not difficult for him to foresee that religious innovations would flourish while the heir to the throne remained in tutelage.

At that time in Paris, the lack of funds and the extraordinarily high cost of living, which was going up every day, made the holy Founder resolve to send the novitiate back to Saint Yon, where it could more easily survive; in the provinces the price of food was not as exorbitant as in the capital. Brother Barthélemy, therefore, left for Rouen in October with three or four novices. That was all he had, because the new form of government which had been instituted would not permit a greater number, as we mentioned before. The novitiate was re-established at Saint Yon, where it has remained ever since. De La Salle lingered another month in Paris with the school Brothers. Before leaving to join the novices, he begged the Brother Director of the house to let him pray for two days shut up in his room, leaving it only to take his meals. He wanted to consult God to learn whether he should go to present his respects to Cardinal de Noailles. Apparently he was inspired not to do so, for after saying Mass early one morning at the parish church of Saint Sulpice, he went to salute Abbé de Brou and bid him good-bye.

That worthy cleric, who devoted himself in a humble and hidden way to all sorts of good works which attract little or no attention, had been asked by De La Chétardie to look after the Brothers after De La Salle had departed for Provence and to render them all the services he could. He always did so with much charity. Because of his concern for the good of the Brothers in Paris, he hastened to object to De La Salle's departure, trying to keep him in the capital. He even went so far as to *forbid him to go*, using a term which he knew would be acceptable to such a humble man and which charity sometimes borrows in order to supplement the lack of real authority.

The reason why this pious priest wanted to keep M. de La Salle in Paris was that he did not know how the Brothers could subsist

without him. Everything cost so much that he feared they would be in dire want. De La Salle, who seemed to find superiors everywhere and who made it his duty to defer to this one in a most particular manner, obeyed him with the simplicity of a child. The Brothers, less inclined to acknowledge quite so many superiors, felt rather put out by this new interference and by the dislocations the delay was going to bring about in their affairs. They felt that the holy Founder's presence was needed at Saint Yon and urged him to go there at once.

To find a way out of the impasse, two of the Brothers went to see De Brou to make him realize that De La Salle was taking in all seriousness the prohibition he had given him not to leave Paris and that the holy man honored in him the authority which a perfectly humble man recognizes in everyone who speaks to him. Consequently, he hesitated to go to Rouen, where he was urgently needed. It must have been a cause of much edification to the pious priest to see a man with the name, the accomplishments, and the age of De La Salle honoring his youth to such an extent and respecting orders which he had no right to give him. As charity had inspired his words, it also led him to retract them when the Brothers assured him that the presence of their Superior was not absolutely necessary in Paris.

## De La Salle at Saint Yon

Having thus returned to the place where he would find a tomb and the end of all his sorrows and labors a few years later, De La Salle thought of nothing thenceforth but of preparing for death, of laying aside all other concerns, and of leaving the Institute in the state he desired it to be. But as his hour had not yet come and he had not quite finished his task, the Brothers did not allow him to enjoy the repose he sought in God while awaiting the eternal rest of heaven.

De La Salle had brought them up in the practice of meticulous obedience. He had taught them not to do anything without permission—in his absence as well as in his presence. Thus it was right that he should be the victim of his own principles and that charity should make agreeable to him the incessant importunities of his disciples: addressing themselves to him directly or by letters, asking him for advice or permissions. In vain did he send them to Brother Barthélemy. They always came back to him, like sons to their father, persuaded that he could not lay aside his authority over them.

The task which he preferred in the house was the direction of the novices. In the past, he had always made that his best-loved occupation and his principal duty, as we have seen, for he was convinced

that the holiness of his Institute depended on the fervor of the novices. Conforming to that principle, he applied himself to his task more assiduously than ever. He observed the young men and examined them thoroughly, seeking to inspire them in all things with the spirit and the maxims of Jesus Christ, to give them a taste for his virtues and his dispositions. He showed even greater zeal in cultivating their interior life than in regulating their external comportment. He had them give him an account of all that went on within them. By observing them so attentively, he obliged them to practice recollection and to pay attention to all the motions of their hearts.

Whatever was not God or did not lead to God meant nothing to him. He esteemed nothing in the novices but virtue; that was what he wished to teach them to value more than anything else. On entering Saint Yon, they had to forget the world and the things of the world or else leave quickly. In that agreeable solitude, heaven was all that counted. Whatever did not concern their salvation was forgotten. The learning of this world was contradicted. The novices would have been unaware that the world existed, if they had not known it before entering. To get along with De La Salle, they needed to be eager for perfection, determined to renounce themselves and to undertake the task of perfectly dying to themselves. In a word, he wanted his novices to be fervent or at least willing to become such; otherwise, he had no use for them. What he was after was holiness, not numbers. Those in whom he discovered courage to labor at their perfection were his friends whom he cherished with special tenderness, yet they were the ones whom he mortified the most.

The Founder strove to make the novices progress rapidly in the thorny path where cowardly nature begs for an opportunity to rest—or at least to catch its breath—and where even the most fervent from time to time need the spur. He pardoned nothing in those generous souls, because he wanted to accustom them not to pardon anything in themselves, to foment an irreconcilable hatred between their heart and their flesh. On this point, he imitated the conduct of that wise superior praised by Saint John Chrysostom, who would have felt he was taking the bread from the mouths of his most perfect inferiors if he had not humiliated and mortified them, in season and out of season, with reason and without reason.

Toward those who were weak in virtue and toward beginners, the holy Founder acted differently. He encouraged and incited them and always upheld them. He tried to make the yoke of Jesus Christ easy for them and to bring them to experience the delight of his service. In their regard, he behaved like a tender mother who carries her

babe in her arms when it is tired of walking and soothes it on her bosom. Those who seemed to be slowing up in the path of virtue aroused his compassion, and yet occasionally they experienced his severity. He urged them on energetically; he incited them and made them feel the prodding of his charity. Even charity, as the saints say, can be sharp and can cause wounds, but they are wounds which heal the malady and never aggravate it.

What did he not tell them to show them their spiritual maladies and the consequences of sin? What did he not do to oblige them to seek healing in prayer, in better preparation for receiving the sacraments, and in evangelical abnegation? The hearts which he found hard and insensible moved him deeply. He deplored their misfortune and seemed frightened by their state. He taught them to weep over themselves, to bewail their condition, and so to avoid the fatal effects of their obstinacy.

Those who appeared uncertain in their vocation won all his care. He sought the cause of their temptation and taught them to discover the causes in themselves. If he did not discern in them the signs of a God-given vocation, he opened the door to them and was the first to invite them to depart. If he happened upon vocations which were defective, he taught such novices how to rectify their intentions and purify their motives. As for those whom the Holy Spirit had led to join the Institute, he omitted nothing that could strengthen their faithfulness to grace and confirm them in their chosen state.

Always ready to listen to all of them, he showed them a father's heart, even in the reprimands addressed to some, as well as in the kindly gestures directed to others. His occupation did not tire or overburden him. He gladly left all other tasks aside to devote himself to that one as to the most important of all, the essential duty. Indeed, what can be expected later on of a man who has not been trained in virtue from his entry into the Community, of a man who has not made a novitiate or who has made it badly? Can a building stand if its foundation is not solid? Can we expect to see a grown man enjoy good health if in his infancy he had no milk, or only bad milk, to nourish him?

## Brother Barthélemy gradually assumes leadership

The virtuous Brother Barthélemy, Director of Novices, was delighted to see De La Salle taking over what had been his duties, and like an elder brother, he took his place among the novices to profit by the instructions given by their common father. This humility delighted the

heart of the holy priest and won his confidence. There was nothing hidden between him and Brother Barthélemy. Making himself in his turn Brother Barthélemy's novice, he asked his advice on all matters, and he followed it. Some of the older Brothers conceived a little jealousy over this preference and would have wished to see their father show his confidence in others of his sons who also seemed to deserve it by their age and their seniority in the Community. But the holy Founder had other maxims. He thought that in a Community, age and seniority could never make up for any lack of virtue or prudence. He felt that only those years should be counted which fervor had sanctified and which were crowned by humility of heart. The rest were only a matter for regret, sorrow, and confusion.

After seven or eight months had gone by in this way in the house of Saint Yon, Brother Barthélemy once again put De La Salle's humility and obedience to the test by asking him to visit the Brothers in the schools of Calais and Boulogne. To demand that he leave his dear solitude meant calling on him for a great sacrifice. But the man who had made so many others did not refuse this one. He left Saint Yon about the middle of 1716. As we have already mentioned, in speaking of the founding of these schools, what De La Salle did during this visit and the manner in which he was welcomed, we shall not repeat the account.

## The need to have a Brother as Superior

On his return from his journey to Calais and Boulogne, De La Salle spent his time in exercises of piety, knowing that prayer is useful for all things and that to it the gifts of grace are promised in this present life and those of glory in the next. Only one thing disturbed him: he dreaded to die in the position of Superior. That honor his humility could not endure, and he felt that the best interests of the Institute did not require it. The last place among the Brothers was the one that his heart longed for. Since he had not been able to occupy the last place during his life, he passionately yearned to do so at his death. The many vain attempts he had made on various occasions to win this point had not made him give up hope of succeeding. The less he found the Brothers disposed to condescend to him on this subject, the more he begged them to give in to his arguments.

He had serious ones indeed. He felt death approaching, for he was already advanced in years. The Brothers were at last able to govern themselves and to find in their ranks a worthy Superior. He had led them, little by little, to look upon Brother Barthélemy as their

leader by turning over to him most of the details of administration. He had accustomed the Brothers to doing without him and his services by refusing to let them involve him in their affairs. It was time for the Institute to assume the shape it would have to maintain, and it was important for this to take place while he lived. There were serious reasons for apprehending that after his death, the Brothers might run into serious difficulties in choosing a successor from among their ranks. It was even to be feared that efforts might be made to deprive them of that right. He knew that measures had already been planned to put a secular priest at their head. Past experience taught him what to expect in the future.

If some people had plotted to profit by his absence from Paris to introduce a new form of government into his Institute while he still lived, what might they not be preparing to do after his death? If on his return to the capital, he had found somebody occupying his place—acting as Superior, even pretending to give him orders and wanting the Founder to acknowledge him and his usurped authority by a written document—what might they not try to force his disciples to do after he was gone? What was more, all the ecclesiastical superiors appointed in the various provinces still kept the title as regards the Brothers, and it was to be feared that some of them, not content with the mere title, might want to act as such. The only way to prevent such disorders in the future was to put things back the way they had originally been and to place a true leader at the head of the flock.

A Brother chosen as Superior in due form by a legitimate assembly and by common consent, raised to this position under the eyes and at the behest of De La Salle himself, recognized and revered by the obedience of the Founder, and confirmed in his jurisdiction by the submission of the Brothers in general, would inaugurate the type of government which had been envisioned ever since the start of the Institute, bringing an end to the system which had recently been abusively foisted on it to its detriment. It was ridiculous, in fact, that the Brothers should not have a Brother to govern them and that they should lose from the start a right possessed by all groups and communities, whether regular or secular—a natural right belonging to all men.

After all, their Society, made up of lay Brothers, resembles more than any other those established in the fourth-century Church. Saint Anthony, Saint Pachomius, Saint Hilarion, and all the other saintly abbots, who had under them whole armies of solitaries, were not priests. The Brothers of Charity have a Superior who is a Brother like themselves, elected from their ranks. A man who had not lived with

the Brothers, who was unfamiliar with their Rule, who did not understand their customs and consequently did not share their same spirit, a man entirely different from them in everything, was hardly fit to be their Superior. Would such a person not be, with regard to them, a new sort of commendatory abbot? What grave inconveniences would such a form of government not lead to? De La Salle could foresee them; he had every reason to fear that an institution which he had so much trouble in defending against the intrigues of those very men who were only waiting for his death to usurp power over it would quickly come to an end when they got hold of it.

## Preparing for the transition

Those reasons, joined to his profound humility, which had always urged him to give up the first place and take the last, in order to give the example of the most perfect obedience, ultimately led the Founder to take the final steps to overcome the opposition of the Brothers. He called them together at Rouen and Saint Yon and declared that his mind was made up to resign his position as Superior and to rid himself even of the name, now that for some time he had given up the exercise of its functions. He told them that they should no longer oppose this design, since it was already partly executed.

By turning over so much of his authority as Superior to another, De La Salle had accustomed them to do without him; he had prepared them to relieve him of the title as well. He insisted that it should be done while he was still living and that they should choose one of their number to take the leadership and should submit to him. There was no time to lose, he added, if they wished to forestall the difficulties which his death might bring to the execution of so important a measure. They could not take too many precautions nor show themselves too careful in making sure that the election would be canonically valid and carried out according to all the rules. Finally, opening his heart, he explained to them the apprehensions for the future which disturbed him.

The decision of the holy Founder was a new source of chagrin and sorrow for his children. It hinted at his approaching demise as well as at his present abdication. Like children soon to be deprived of a beloved father, who do not want to hear either his death or his absence spoken of, they heeded the sentiments of nature rather than the dictates of reason and sought to turn down a proposal which so afflicted them. They represented to him the difficulties which a change would bring about, the sorrow they would experience if they were

deprived of his direction and wise counsels. The election of a new Superior would leave them little liberty to address themselves to him in confidence as they had always done. The servant of God disposed of all these objections by promising that he would remain with them and be for them what he had been up to then, that he would keep them close to his heart, would listen to them, would continue doing all he could for them, and would render them all the assistance that a good father owes his sons. Finally, he gave them so many reasons that they could no longer oppose what he planned to do.

Once all of the Brothers had yielded to the Founder's proposal, the next step was to set in motion the preliminaries for the election of one of them as Superior. To do so within the rules, an assembly of the whole Community should be convoked in a convenient and suitable place; all the Brothers must consent to the gathering; the principal Brothers should be summoned to it, and all the others must promise in writing to subscribe and submit to whatever the assembly might decide.

All the Brothers present having agreed on these points, the holy priest suggested a means of carrying out the proposal. The simplest and shortest way to get everything arranged in peace and good understanding, he said, is to send one of you to all the houses, someone acceptable to the Brothers and enjoying their esteem, to prepare them wisely and calmly to share our views and to understand the reasons which make it necessary to call the assembly and to proceed without delay to the election of a new Superior; above all, it is necessary to make sure of the consent of all the houses of the Institute. As to where the meeting should be held, there can be no better place than Saint Yon. Here, in solitude, liberty, and peace, we will gather from all over France and decide on whatever we like, without distractions, obstacles, or publicity, so that the world will not know what is going on. If you agree with this, he concluded, pick out the Brother whom you wish to send as your deputy to the others, the one you feel best qualified to handle this affair. They all turned to Brother Barthélemy. He was meek, prudent, and held in high esteem by all the Brothers.

## Brother Barthélemy tours the Institute

Carrying the instructions of his worthy Superior, Brother Barthélemy left Saint Yon in October 1716 and spent the rest of that year visiting the more distant houses. Then, having returned to Saint Yon, he gave De La Salle an account of what he had accomplished and received more advice from him. Soon afterward, he resumed his travels to

complete what he had begun. His journey was marked by God's special protection, especially on two very dangerous occasions when God saved him.

On the first, he fell from his horse and, unable to disengage his foot from the stirrup, was dragged a considerable distance. He could have been killed in the accident, as has happened to so many others, but God protected him, and he escaped with nothing worse than a bad fright.

On a second occasion, two thieves threatened him one evening as he was leaving a certain city and pursued him quite some time, but they did him no harm, for they seemed to be held back from him. They came close to him and wanted to stop him, but they could not do so. They seemed to be restrained by an invisible hand. The thieves themselves were astonished at what was happening and did not know what to say or to do. Brother Barthélemy, uneasy over such evil company, asked them several times with his usual calm what they wanted. But as though their tongues were tied as well as their hands, they remained disconcerted and speechless. Finally, they separated from him, to their mutual satisfaction, for the bandits were glad to find their freedom restored. As for Brother Barthélemy he bade them farewell with great relief. When he saw that he was alone, he recognized God's hand in his deliverance and blessed his goodness.

For the rest, Brother Barthélemy's journey was successful. He was received everywhere with great tokens of joy and respect, and he found all hearts docile and open. He made the Brothers understand and approve all the plans that had been made, and in each house he took care to get the Brothers to sign a statement consenting to the election of a Brother Superior and promising to ratify whatever was decided in the coming assembly.

De La Salle took all these precautions—and others which we purposely omit—because he considered the meeting as the accomplishment of all his plans and the beginning of the establishment of his Society in its natural condition. From the beginning at Reims, he had wanted to give it that form of government. He had sought to bring it about at Vaugirard as early as 1694, and for over thirty years, he had tried several times to achieve it but had always found invincible opposition on the part of his disciples, as we have mentioned. He would have met with the same attitude, even to his death, if he had not made use of a pious artifice inspired by his humility to triumph over it. The artifice was to get the Brothers accustomed, little by little, to get along without him and to leave unused the authority which they did not want to see him lay aside in favor of anybody else.

Once he had taken this resolution, he never went back on it, and when he departed to hide himself in Provence, he left in Paris the government of the Institute, which he never again consented to take up fully when he returned. The letters which reached him in Provence he refused to answer. That obliged the Brothers to consider him as someone dead and to look no more to him for any services. When the Brothers ordered him to leave his place of retirement and to come back to Paris, they found him docile to their voice and ready to receive their orders but not to resume his functions as Superior.

Disappointed in not having been able to lay aside his title, he handed over its exercise to Brother Barthélemy. Although Superior in name, he was no longer such in fact. That was the only reason that convinced the Brothers to give him a successor. We might as well do it, they reasoned, since he no longer wishes to govern us. It was time for them to agree, because De La Salle had only two more years to live. If the Institute had not taken the steps to choose a leader from among its members while he still lived, it would in all probability have been obliged to accept one imposed from outside.

Inexpressible was the joy De La Salle felt when he learned of the success of Brother Barthélemy's mission and of God's protection of him on his journey. Delighted at the prospect of finally being able to lay aside a burden which he had found so irksome for so many years, he blessed God and longed for the happy moment when he would finally be at liberty. It was, however, necessary to wait until summer before calling the Brothers together, particularly as it had become the custom among them to hold such gatherings at Pentecost and to prepare by a retreat those who would take part in the meeting.

## The assembly at Saint Yon in 1717

The same program was followed this time. All the Brothers Directors were called to Saint Yon; sixteen of them were dutifully present on the appointed day. Pentecost Sunday was the first day of their retreat, which De La Salle opened by a fervent discourse on the importance of doing well what they were about to undertake. He proposed a method of proceeding in a supernatural manner during this gathering and in the election of a new Superior. He had drawn this up himself and had taken it partly from the Rule and Constitutions of Saint Ignatius. He had also composed a prayer, in French, to invoke the Holy Spirit and to implore his assistance, and he gave them copies to use.

The Brothers were faithful to say this prayer five or six times a day. They also conformed to the other advice of their holy Founder,

as well as to the arrangements he had drawn up for the retreat and for the election. They asked him several times to preside over the assembly and to take the lead in the exercises as being their true Superior, but he did not consider it proper to do so. He withdrew to his poor little cell to raise his hands to heaven and draw down on his sons an abundance of grace, after urging them to let the Holy Spirit himself preside over their assembly and to beg him unceasingly *to show them the one whom he had chosen* as their Superior.

Purify your intentions and desires, he told them, if you wish to be used as God's instruments in naming the one destined for you. Avoid all human views; do not listen to the voice of nature; reject all false lights and the prejudices inspired by selfishness. Consider yourselves in this election like the Apostles in the choice of the one who would replace the perfidious Judas, without any self-interest or preconceived notions, without sympathy or antipathy, without passion or personal inclinations, without yielding to any attraction or repugnance of nature. Keep your hearts in complete indifference, and do not let them be fixed on anyone but the Brother whom the majority of the votes will indicate.

As it is not you who should choose but God acting through you and in you, always keep your mind raised toward God, and do not grow weary of addressing to the Lord this prayer of the Apostles: *Show us the one whom you have chosen.* If you wish to know who this one is, give your vote to the person whom your conscience demands, the one possessed of the greatest virtue, the one whom at the hour of death you will wish you had chosen, the one most capable of governing the Institute, who excels in its spirit, is the model and exemplar of this spirit, and is the most capable of maintaining regularity, of causing fervor to reign, and of sanctifying you. Name the one among you whom you know to be the most enlightened, the wisest, the most virtuous, the firmest. Give your vote to the one who most perfectly possesses the qualities so necessary to govern God's family: prudence, mildness, vigilance, firmness, piety, zeal, and charity. Give it to the one who combines in himself in the highest degree these virtues which are so difficult to join together: zeal and prudence, clearsightedness and charity, firmness and mildness, goodness and severity. Give it to the one who is mild but not weak, vigilant but not meddlesome, firm but not inflexible, zealous but not harsh, kind but not weak, prudent but not crafty.

Give your vote to the one who is the holiest or who wishes to become such, so that he may be your model whom you may imitate in all things, to the one who will be the humblest while occupying

the first place, who will show you a father's heart and will make you love his authority. In this choice, do not pay attention to talents, birth, age, seniority in the Company, personal appearance, and stature. In a word, do not consider the man; consider only God. You will certainly choose the one whom God has selected if you seek someone who agrees with his heart, not yours, a man of grace in whom grace acts, not a man according to your tastes who is pleasing to nature.

## The election of Brother Barthélemy

With these words and others of the same kind, the servant of God led his disciples to the dispositions he desired to see in them. They chose Brother Barthélemy as the president of the assembly. After two days and many prayers, it was he who received the majority of the votes and was elected Superior General of the Institute. They immediately brought the news to De La Salle, who did not seem surprised. *He has been acting as such for a long time*, he remarked.

All the Brothers congratulated themselves on this choice; only the chosen one condemned it. If he could have done so, he would by his prayers and tears have caused them to retract an election which he did not wish to ratify. He felt all the weight of the responsibility that they wished to place on his shoulders, and he could not bring himself to assume a burden that the holy Founder himself had for so long sought to lay aside. When the Brothers knelt before him to acknowledge his authority and submit themselves obediently to him, they made him all the more fearful of having to command them. He regretted all the more the impossibility of no longer being able to obey. By humbling themselves before him, they added to his confusion. He blushed to find himself in De La Salle's place. His sorrow choked back his words. The tears he shed continued to reproach the Brothers with this election, but they would not listen either to his complaints or to his reproaches.

Because his sighs were no more effective than his pleas, he was obliged to accept through obedience a position which his humility would have refused, but he agreed only on condition that two Brothers, chosen from among the most able, should be given him as his aides to share with him the weight of his responsibility. That was done. The assembly appointed two of the principal Brothers as his assistants to help him with their advice. The retreat continued until Trinity Sunday, which was the great feast of the Institute. The Brothers renewed their vows on that day, immediately after De La Salle and Brother Barthélemy had first renewed theirs.

After the retreat, the meetings continued, on De La Salle's advice, in order to examine all the rules once again, under the guidance of the new Superior, and to add or delete in full liberty whatever might be thought necessary. Once the observations and remarks were made, it was decided unanimously to place these suggestions into the hands of De La Salle and to ask him to make whatever use he wished of them. He promised that he would work at the project, and, in fact, he applied himself to the task of revision with great diligence. It was at this time that the Founder composed the chapters on modesty and on good government, taken in part from the Rule and Constitutions of Saint Ignatius, which he wisely adapted to the needs of the Institute. He also wrote the chapter on regularity and a few others which did not yet figure in the Rule. Given by its very author the form which it has today, it was authenticated and signed by Brother Barthélemy and then sent to all the houses to be observed uniformly by all the Brothers of the Institute.

## Chapter XV

### *Remarks on the rule for recreation and on the Rule of the Brother Director*

Although we have already spoken of the rule concerning recreation, it seems useful to say more about it here, since some Brothers wished to modify it. During the assembly of 1717, a new examination was made of the chapter of the Rule which lays down the manner in which the Brothers should act during the recreation periods. Among other things, it states that the Brothers "should not speak without having first saluted Brother Director and received permission from him. They should not speak of any person in particular, except to speak well of him. They should not inquire about anything curious or useless. They should keep silence when separated from the others. They should not indulge in any buffoonery or unseemly behavior or perform any indecorous gestures. They should not speak too loudly or laugh boisterously. They should not contradict each other or correct what another has said, since this is something that only Brother Director should do. Finally, they should converse on edifying topics which can lead them to love God and to practice virtue."

It must be admitted that this chapter calls for a high degree of perfection and presupposes that the Brothers are real saints or men

who wish to become such. Those who are holy are filled with God and like to speak only of God. *From the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks*, says Jesus Christ. From the treasure of his heart, a good man draws holy and edifying talk. Filled with God, he thinks of God always and wants to speak of God unceasingly. All other topics displease him, bore him, or leave him indifferent. Saint Francis Borgia seemed to drowse, and he found it difficult not to fall asleep when people talked in his presence of things other than God or that did not refer to God. Such were all the saints. *They hear the world and the things of the world spoken of only with regret*, as the author of The Imitation says, while they always listen with fresh delight to any talk about God or the things of God.

If a certain disinclination to speak of anything but God is not always a sure sign of holiness, it is at least a great means of attaining it. *Those who are of the world speak of the world, and those who are of God speak of God and like to hear God spoken of,* as Our Lord says. When we speak of the world, we fill ourselves with the world and the concerns of the world; when we speak of God, we fill ourselves with God and what refers to God, and we empty ourselves of the world and of worldly concerns. *Evil conversations corrupt good morals*, says Saint Paul. Why? Because evil talk fills the mind with evil thoughts and the heart with evil desires. On the contrary, pious discourses fill the mind with holy thoughts and the heart with sentiments which lead us to God. Hence you will never find a fervent religious eager for profane conversations, which fill the mind with useless ideas. His aim is to keep his mind lifted up to God and his heart united with him. He seeks to banish from his conversations all that can cause him to lose recollection. As nothing leads us to God more surely than speaking about God, a true religious allows himself no other conversations. If he does allow them, he finds himself ill at ease.

## De La Salle's rule for recreation

Following these principles, De La Salle made it a rule for his disciples to avoid in their recreations everything that might distract them, trivialize them, empty them of God, and fill them with the world and with worldly concerns. If he does not suppose that all of them are already saints, he gives them credit for wishing to become such. Now, all those who are saints or want to become saints appreciate these rules and find satisfaction in conforming to them. True, the tepid do not like them, and those who are beginning to grow irregular or to become relaxed also find them very irksome. That is their own fault;

they should accuse nobody but themselves. If this rule no longer pleases them, the reason is that they are no longer what the rule supposes them to be: fervent and eager for their sanctification. By the dissatisfaction they feel with such a rule, they can judge how far they have relaxed in their pursuit of virtue.

De La Salle had weighty reasons for establishing this rule. His long experience had taught him how much good or how much evil recreation can produce, according as it is well or badly conducted. Disorder in communities ordinarily has no other source than the misconduct that so easily insinuates itself into this activity. As Saint Madeleine de Pazzi observed, in badly made recreations, the devil reaps the most profit; from them arises the loss of those religious who are damned. The great reformer of a monastic order, the celebrated M. de Rancé, Abbot of La Trappe, feared such recreations so much that he did away with them altogether and did not allow any at all.

In permitting them to his followers, De La Salle sought a means of sanctifying them. To do this, it was necessary to prevent the sins so easily committed during them and to promote the practice of the virtues proper to this exercise. How many ill-regulated actions do members of communities not make themselves guilty of in recreation when they are not watchful over themselves? Light, indiscreet, and unmeasured words, frivolity, idle chatter, and impoliteness are the least of the lot. Pretentious statements, bragging, arrogance, scorn for our neighbor, worldliness, curiosity about news or the pleasure of imparting it, speaking about the world and the things of the world, or inquiring about them are faults which easily escape human weakness during recreation time. Particular friendships, little plots, murmuring, mockery, slander, quarrels, disputes, and many other defects which affect or wound charity are frequently found there, as well as biting words, animosity, resentment, impatience, bitterness, anger, moodiness, bad humor, patronizing airs, harsh, cutting, or scornful language, clowning, voicing dangerous principles or unedifying topics, and many other faults against either modesty or humility or contrary to the other virtues. These are all sins which members of communities may be guilty of.

Now the rule that we are speaking of does away with all of these sins, and in addition, it helps us to practice the virtues of humility, obedience, recollection, and Christian courtesy. It teaches us to speak with circumspection, measure, and wisdom, to listen in silence, and to profit by what is said. It leads the heart to God, nourishes devotion, inflames the soul with fervor, and makes recreation a kind of spiritual conference, unconstrained and agreeable. It instructs, enlightens,

warms the heart, encourages, consoles, produces spiritual joy, and fills us with God. In a word, from a recreation carried on in this manner we often experience, as several of the Brothers know, more fervor and goodwill than from our interior prayer. When we speak of God and the things of God with simplicity, candor, and cheerfulness, God is found in the midst of us. As they separated, the Brothers could often say, like the disciples of Emmaus, *Were not our hearts burning within us while we conversed so enthusiastically about the things of God?* Did not Jesus Christ seem to be in our midst and to speak to us?

## Varied opinions about religious recreation

But, someone will object, such a recreation is not really recreation; it is interior prayer or a spiritual conference. This objection was made long ago. De La Salle heard it often, but he did not let it disturb him. It is true that recreation carried on in this way is no longer a recreation that robs us of recollection, no longer a profane, worldly, vicious, and dangerous practice, but nothing prevents it from being a true recreation while remaining holy and spiritual. For in taking recreation thus (when the weather permits), the Brothers are out in the fresh air; they move about; they speak; they allow their eyes and senses decent liberty; they let their minds relax, and they reinvigorate their bodies.

Because each one asks permission to speak by a sign, because one person takes his turn talking and all do not talk at once, because nobody shouts or gets excited and wears out his vocal cords or lungs by arguing vociferously, does this mean that we are not recreating ourselves? Is it essential to recreation for all of us to speak at once, to brawl so that we cannot hear one another, to stir up a cloud of dust and breathe it in while making violent motions, or to make our arms, legs, and whole body share in the tongue's excitement? Is it essential to recreation to spend it in playing, in boisterous exercise, in being so agitated that when it is over, our faces are bathed in sweat, our heads buzzing, and our chests exhausted?

"I number among the causes of relaxation" (says a famous author) "the recreations that have been introduced in these recent times. The Rule of Saint Benedict does not say a word about them, nor does any other ancient rule that I know of. This practice seems to be founded on the opinion of some modern theologians who feel that free and light-hearted conversation is a necessary respite after serious application of the mind, like rest after bodily work, and they call the proper use of this mental relaxation the virtue of *eutrapelia*. But they

do not know that this pseudo-virtue, derived from Aristotle, is numbered by Saint Paul among the vices, under the same name of *eutrapelia*. What has deceived them is that not understanding Greek, they have found in the Latin text of Saint Paul the word *scurrility*, which they have not neglected to classify among the vices. The same word means a vice in Latin and a virtue in Greek. And so, if I am not mistaken, there we have the origin of these recreations. The fact is that conversation is not needed to give us respite from too great tension of mind. Bodily motion is more appropriate—walking or light manual work, for instance—for this movement returns to the more distant parts of the body the animal spirits which were too concentrated in the brain. Conversation, on the contrary, entertains and often augments the agitation of the mind, not to speak of the temptations to which it exposes us: raillery, backbiting, and rash judgments about matters of Church or state, for the topics of the day are often what are discussed in these recreations. I refer the reader to his own experience, and I beg religious persons to ask themselves what is the most ordinary matter of their confessions, frequent as these are."

Without adopting the conjecture on the origin of recreations that this author hazards in an essay in which so many excellent ideas can be found, his final reflection, borrowed from the celebrated Abbé de Rancé, seems extremely reasonable and true. No one has better discussed this subject than that great reformer of monastic perfection in the last century. He treats of it with his usual emphasis and eloquence in his fifteenth explanation, which deals with some of the difficulties found in his *Book on the Monastic Life*.

## Abbé de Rancé on religious recreation

"We have been reproached," he says, "with being too severe on the subject of conversations, and some have pretended that it would be useful, nay, even necessary, for religious to engage in amusing conversations and to employ these so-called innocent pastimes." To answer this criticism, he shows that every Christian is obliged to imitate Jesus Christ, whose entire life was painful and laborious. "Nowhere in his life," he continues, "do we find anything like a diversion or recreation. His sacred lips never opened to utter a word of mockery; laughter he did not know; indeed, he called down a malediction on those who laugh: *Woe to you who laugh*. Saint Paul, who was so filled with the spirit of Jesus Christ, forbids these sorts of conversations to Christians. They are referred to in the Vulgate by the term *scurrilitas*, which means amusing and agreeable stories told to make others laugh

but which do not suit the only affair that we have to concern ourselves with in this world, namely, our sanctification, serving God and pleasing him; *scurrilitas* is not to the main point. If abstinence from joking and funny stories were a form of perfection foreign to a monk, we might say that he had no obligation to practice it, but it is so closely connected to his profession, so intimately bound up to the penance he has assumed as an obligation, that we cannot fail to count it among the things that the monk must naturally expect to find in his path.

"Nothing proves more clearly that it is a mistake to want to introduce such practices into religious houses, which can justly be called houses of prayer, than the consideration of the inconveniences which follow from them. For if these stories and conversations—which are supposed to contribute to the recreation of the Brothers and to dissipate the vapors which, some people suppose, solitude and retirement cause to gather—are really capable of doing this, and if these witticisms are keen, delicate, and clever, as can happen according to the type of mind that produces them, is it not to be feared that they will be sought after more than they should be? Will those who invent them not be pleased at having won admiration? Will they not seek applause from those who hear them? Will they not spend their time looking for clever sayings and preparing in their cells what they intend to say in recreation? And will not this spirit, which is really the spirit of the world, displace the simplicity, mortification, and piety which should reign in the cloister?

"If, on the contrary, these jokes are clumsy and vulgar, if they lack the wit which alone makes them capable of amusing anyone, the conversations will be filled with idle tales, impertinent remarks, stupid jests, and trifles capable of corrupting hearts and minds and of filling them with low thoughts and sentiments unworthy of the exalted state of religion. The result will be that the Brothers will contract improper familiarity with one another. Instead of looking on each other with esteem and charity, they will only despise one another.

"Moreover, in such conversations it is so difficult to keep to the golden mean that hardly anybody can avoid exaggerating in one way or another. Our feet are on a steep and slippery slope; it takes only one false step to fall into a liberty that the law of Jesus Christ does not admit of, either for a simple Christian or for a monk. It is very hard not to allow ourselves to be surprised on such occasions. A word escapes too freely; evil-mindedness picks it up. We do not show our neighbor all the reserve we owe him. The joy which we wish to arouse has nothing to restrain it and degenerates into heedlessness

and license. On leaving these conversations, we always feels spiritually drained, distracted, troubled, perhaps scrupulous—if we are inclined to be so—and suffering from a number of other similar maladies. Show me, if you can, how this conduct is compatible with that presence of God, that spirit of renunciation, that purity of heart, that perfection that Jesus Christ expects of monks. For my part, I consider such conduct no less opposed to that perfection than shadows are contrary to light.

"We can find a peremptory argument in the instructions that the saints have left us on this topic. Saint Benedict forbids and banishes absolutely from the conversation of his Brothers all frivolities, mockery, and useless words, those that lead to laughter or excite that human joy which some consider so necessary and innocent. He was careful not to change his opinion, for he wanted the Brothers not to lose sight of death or of the judgments of God. He wanted them always to keep in mind the reality of eternal rewards and punishments. The opinion of this great man, whom Jesus Christ gave to his Church as the founder and patriarch of all the monks of the West, should silence all those who think otherwise."

After proving his affirmations by the authority of Saint John Chrysostom, Saint Ambrose, and Saint Basil, Abbé de Rancé refutes the objections to his thesis. "A number of arguments," he says, "are brought forward to counter this opinion and to establish the contrary one. It is said that we should not condemn what is granted to religious merely to afford relaxation to their minds, exhausted by constant tension and unremitting exercises. Such an argument does not even deserve a hearing. First, just because something may be useful or even necessary, does it follow that we should put it into practice? We should first inquire whether it is in no way wrong, whether it is free from all evil consequences, whether there is nothing in it contrary to the true rules. If it sanctions even a little departure from them or is opposed to them, we cannot doubt that it is forbidden to make use of it, whatever good or advantage it might afford.

"It is mere imagination to suppose that such recreations, diversions and merrymaking are necessary and that monks and solitaries need them to dissipate the clouds which, it is said, obscure the spirit in solitude. There are other means for doing this which are more proper and more suitable to their profession and to which they can have recourse: when they assemble on certain occasions, when they hold conferences in the manner we have explained, when they leave the state of inner recollection which is habitual for them, when they speak of God with holy liberty, and when they converse freely and

unhindered about what refers to their duties or to the life, actions, beliefs, and remarkable statements of the holy Fathers, to the constancy and happiness of the martyrs, who preferred the glory of dying for Jesus Christ to all this world's happiness. Finally, when they speak of all that can stimulate their zeal and increase their ardor and fidelity in God's service, we must admit that such conversations are all that is needed to give them true consolation, to restore to their minds whatever they may have lost in the depths of their silence and retirement."

Let the reader continue with what this author says in the same work. It is a pity to have to omit such splendid passages, but they would be too long to insert here. We can also read in the rest of his rebuttal the way he answers the argument that this manner of making fun and amusing ourselves not only involves nothing reprehensible but is a virtue that the ancients called *eutrapelia*.

To use the words of this new Saint Bernard, *Those who object may say whatever they like, but I know that the irregularities, the exaggerations, the factions and cabals, the party spirit, the murmuring, and the dubious friendships that flourish in cloisters all start because of the communications that the Brothers have with each other*. I cannot too strongly approve a rule which does away with all such disorders and which, without forbidding all recreation, obliges the Brothers to sanctify it by the actual practice of humility, obedience, Christian civility, and discretion in word and by limiting themselves to holy and spiritual conversation.

## Some difficulties

True, this rule is irksome for nature and contradicts self-love. That was why some of the Brothers, seeing that the Rule was being subjected to revision, thought that it would be a favorable opportunity for having the rule of recreation modified; they tried to bring it about. However, after much discussion, they gave up their proposal, as we shall see after I explain what had given rise to the rule in the first place.

From the beginning of the Society of the Brothers, De La Salle had introduced among them the practice of very strict silence. Although he allowed them a period of pious conversation after dinner and after supper, he forbade all speaking except under truly necessary circumstances. Those who had to speak by reason of the duties of their position or those who had obtained permission were to speak in a few words and in a low tone. He punished faults against this regulation severely, considering them far from minor, for, as Saint Scholastica says, silence is the guardian angel of communities.

To maintain this exact silence in its perfection, De La Salle permitted recreations, which he considered both as a respite necessary for human weakness and as a new means of sanctification. Constant tension and application of mind demand some relaxation, and bodies engaged in exercises of piety or in labor need some rest. Nothing wastes away the body more than an uninterrupted interior life, where we are constantly engaged in mortifying the senses and keeping watch over the movements of the heart. Such a regime is like a constant drip of water which noiselessly and insensibly wears out nature's resistance. Recreation is the relief provided by nearly all communities to restore the soul's strength and enable it to renew its attention to itself. Recreation, if well performed, can—like any other action—become a means of sanctification, for it provides frequent opportunities for practicing all the virtues. We can leave recreation filled with God and with fervor if we are careful to bring Jesus Christ into it and to converse with him in simplicity of heart.

These two motives which have introduced the practice of recreation into nearly all communities did not permit the holy Founder, so full of tenderness and concern for the needs of his children and for their health, to forbid such moments of relaxation in his Society. At first, he gave the Brothers full liberty to speak and to recreate themselves without interfering with them by any regulations. In fact, none was needed. Fervent souls discover within themselves the laws inspired by the Holy Spirit, and as they follow where the Holy Spirit leads, all their words are measured and all their actions sanctified. In those blessed early days, the Brothers were so recollected, so attentive to themselves, so circumspect in all things that there was no need to restrain them by regulations. Filled with God, they spoke of God; any other discourse was foreign to them. But alas, such is the frailty of human nature. Among us men, fervor is always a passing visitor to which natural slothfulness never gets accustomed and which is eventually eliminated.

For several years, nothing was more edifying than the Brothers' recreations. God was their object; spiritual topics were the matter of their discourses; the practice of virtue was their exercise. Recreations resembled the conferences of the Fathers of the desert; each Brother came to them only in order to contribute his own fervor and to take away with him that of the others. Modesty and recollection were combined with noble simplicity; agreeable openness of heart, with polite and courteous behavior. Loud talk, frivolous words, vulgarities, loquaciousness, sallies of humor, vivacity, shallow exchanges, and all the other common defects in conversations were unknown there.

But they did finally put in an appearance. While speaking of God, the Brothers began to speak of other things, too. After beginning the recreation by spiritual topics, they ended up by discussing worldly matters. Then confusion, lack of restraint, and loss of recollection followed and brought along with them the other disorders which so easily penetrate recreation. The more fervent Brothers grew dissatisfied, and the time of recreation became a sort of martyrdom for them. De La Salle noticed the trouble at its inception, but he could not put a stop to it. Neither daily penances nor exhortations were able to arrest the contagion.

Because it was recreation time, some thought that anything was permitted. Several of the most fervent Brothers stopped coming, on the pretext that they had other things to do. Many of the novices were tempted to leave their vocation, and several of them did so. The Brothers lost the mutual respect that they owed each other. Even the Brothers Directors were not spared, and at times De La Salle himself suffered the same treatment. Indeed, some took advantage of his patience. Because he made himself all things to all men and appeared among them as though he were just an ordinary Brother, some of them, lacking in good manners, exercised his forbearance by their vulgarities and their uncivil behavior, which he pretended not to notice and over which he did not show any displeasure. However, none of these drawbacks suggested to De La Salle the idea of suppressing recreation or of eliminating the abuses that had crept in. He endured patiently an evil that he could not remedy and hoped that God would provide a solution. He was neither upset nor astonished, because he knew that even the holiest communities from their early days had suffered from like disorders during recreation.

I myself heard the Founder say that the Society of Jesus, so virtuous and so holy, which even its bitterest enemies have to admit is very regular, had encountered the same problem in the beginning and that steps had to be taken to remedy the evil by new regulations. At that time, only fourteen years had elapsed since De La Salle had founded his Institute, and already the abuses in recreation had begun to affect its fervor. God, however, did not permit the evil to go any farther but applied a remedy almost without anyone's realizing it. In about 1694, when there were only five houses and not more than thirty Brothers, De La Salle, influenced by an extraordinary movement of fervor, was making a month's retreat at the novitiate in Vaugirard with four of the principal Brothers. He was inspired to seek a means for shutting the door on all false liberty during recreation. We explained in the proper place what he did to this end; we shall not repeat it here.

Some years later, the servant of God set down in writing what he had authorized in practice and made it the sixth chapter of his Rule. He considered the chapter so important that he had it read every Sunday during dinner, so that all might pay attention to it and observe it faithfully. He was not disappointed. He had the consolation of bringing back to the recreation of the Brothers the fervor that had originally characterized it. The rule which taught them to sanctify this exercise corrected all the abuses that existed, and the fidelity with which the rule was observed prevented the abuses from ever recurring.

The chapter on the manner of behaving in recreation, so conformable to the maxims of the Gospel and of the saints, had been in use among the Brothers for nearly twenty-four years without having met with any serious opposition during all that time. It was only in the 1717 assembly that three or four Brothers suggested to the others that they should modify a regulation which so constrained nature, even in the very action which was supposed to provide nature with some relaxation. The holy Founder had turned over to the members of the assembly the complete Rule, which had not yet received any approval from the Holy See. He allowed the Brothers full liberty to make whatever changes they desired. The chapter on recreation became the main topic of this examination, at the request of the three or four Brothers who were present.

After much discussion extending over two meetings and after much prayer, it was agreed, to conclude the affair in unanimity, that they would consult superiors of communities who had the highest reputation and the most experience. So that the interested parties could not complain that they had not been allowed to present their points of view, two who advocated changes were delegated to plead their cause before such arbiters. De La Salle was asked if he approved of this, and his prudence could not let him refuse. He quite willingly abandoned his work to revision by others.

Père Paul Baudin, at that time the director of the Jesuit novitiate in Rouen, who later became provincial—a man of uncommon piety, wisdom, and talent, as well as of great experience in government—was one of the main authorities consulted on this question. He and the other superiors of well-known communities all came to the same conclusion. After listening attentively to the arguments on both sides, they concluded that the Brothers should continue to spend their recreations as they had been doing for twenty-four years with so many blessings and that they should be careful not to change anything. The opinion was clear and decisive, but it is rare for those who have lost their case to acquiesce in the sentence which condemns them.

One of the Brothers who urged changing the rule appealed from the opinion to the example of the judges themselves, and he pretended to find a contradiction between what these superiors had decided and what took place in their communities. In your own houses, which are so regular, he said, the recreations are not carried on in such a constraining manner. Even games are permitted, such as bowling, tenpins, and quoits. Say *tolerated*, not *permitted*, these men of experience replied. Such things were not allowed in the Rule, but these customs have been introduced little by little. We endure them because we cannot do away with them. We can see their unfortunate consequences, but we cannot remedy them.

At this, the Brother was reduced to silence and said no more. The others who shared his opinion imitated him, and it was finally decided, with no dissenting voices, that the chapter of the Rule concerning recreation would remain as it was. So that no one in the future, in ignorance of what had taken place, might pretend to change it, the assembly decreed that the manner of making recreation, authorized by twenty-four years of experience with great benefit for the Institute, should remain unmodified in the future as being the most suitable for body and soul, the most agreeable to the fervent Brothers and to those who wished to become such.

De La Salle, who not only was endowed with great wisdom but also possessed much experience, was so convinced of this that he made the rule of recreation one of the four essential supports of his Institute. He went even farther, because in the Rule of the Brother Director, of which we shall soon speak, he ordered the Director to be present at recreation rather than at interior prayer if he was forced to choose to be absent from one or the other of these exercises and to take some other time for his prayer, so convinced was he that the progress or the decline of a community starts with the manner of making recreation.

## Recreation and the policy on boarders

Finally, to complete what needs to be said on this topic, all the points of the Rule which make up the chapter on recreation are antidotes for the defects which can creep into it and which had indeed crept into it in spite of the care and attention of the vigilant Superior. It was to correct these disorders committed under his eyes that he detailed the practice of the contrary virtues. Because the light of the Holy Spirit showed him that such important rules might be neglected if strangers lived with the Brothers, he closed the doors of their ordinary schools

to boarders, who never keep silence, who tend to be too free in their recreations, and who bring with them everywhere disturbance, disorder, and irregularity. Directors must pay attention to this. Let them remember that regularity will begin to suffer in the community as soon as it is open to boarders. Let them trust the wisdom of their Founder on this point and follow the Rule approved by the Holy See, which forbids them to accept boarders into their ordinary schools, because silence and the rule of recreation would suffer along with the other exercises.

But how can they refuse such a favor to a friend, a benefactor, or some person in authority? By showing the Rule which forbids it. This excuse will always be accepted by a person with true religious spirit. A denial authorized by the Rule never offends anyone who thinks rightly. Firmness in observing the Rule edifies even those who are asking for its transgression. Disregarding it often scandalizes the very friends who request the derogation. Seculars never conceive a higher regard for persons living in a community than when they find them regular and faithful to their duties. When we are resolved to turn down a friend, a benefactor, or a person in authority who asks for something that God does not allow, we are ready to refuse when he demands what the Rule forbids. Instead of saying: But how can we say no to a friend, a benefactor, a person in authority? we should say instead: How can we violate a rule that our Founder considered as the safeguard of silence and of the spiritual exercises?

## The importance of the Brother Director

All that we have been saying makes it clear that De La Salle did all he could to sanctify recreation and to remove from such a dangerous action all the faults which too often disfigure it. The behavior of the Brothers Directors also drew his attention to an equal degree. In the Institute, the name Director is given to the one in charge of each house who must watch over the Brothers, his inferiors, take the lead in the exercises, manage the business of the house, both interior and exterior, and give an account of everything to Brother Superior, whose vicar he is, so to speak. It is easy to see that the well-being or the decline of the Institute depends on the proper or improper behavior of the Directors. They are subaltern leaders, each of whom has a portion of the flock to guide. They are the captains of the chosen people and share in caring for them by watching over the group committed to them. They are the eyes and the tongue of the head, that is, of the Superior who governs the entire body.

After a careful study of the reasons for the decadence of monasteries and for the relaxation that had overtaken the most flourishing communities, De La Salle concluded that the decline was due to the superiors. According to him, it was their fault if the devil caused such ravages in these earthly paradises. It was through their negligence that relaxation and then vice and disorder penetrated there. If they had been vigilant, firm, and regular, the delightful gardens of the sacred Spouse would not have fallen fallow; they would still be today what they were at the start. Primitive fervor would still make them the honor of the Church and the bountiful radiance of Jesus Christ.

Convinced of this, the holy Founder often said that the Institute was in the hands of the Brothers Directors. They were the ones who labored either to build it up or to tear it down; its regularity depended on theirs, and fervor would not be maintained therein except through their fidelity to the Rule and to their duties. Convinced that God knows those who are modeled after the divine heart and that God's hand alone knows how to form them, he prayed and fasted continually to obtain from heaven Directors of proven virtue, filled with faith and the Holy Spirit.

To win this favor, starting about the year 1696 and continuing until 1710, he had established in his Community the practice of a daily fast and daily Communion. In other words, each day one or several Brothers, depending on the number in each house, fasted and received Communion in turn every week to ask God to give them worthy Directors. Finally, at the suggestion of the older Brothers, meeting in Paris, this fast was fixed by De La Salle on Fridays and extended to all the Brothers. It has thus become a fast of Rule, as it were, or rather, a fast dedicated by custom for this same intention, as is also the Thursday Communion or that made on a feast day during the week.

De La Salle, who when it came to penance had a hard time moderating himself, did not content himself with one fast day each week. He fasted continually for four years, not excepting Sundays and the most solemn feasts, including Easter, Pentecost, and Christmas, and so rigorous was his fast that he ate nothing for his collation but a piece of dry bread and drank only plain water.

## The Rule of the Brother Director

About 1700, De La Salle composed the Rule of the Brother Director, which he sent in manuscript form to all the houses, ordering the Directors to have it read in the refectory during dinner on the first Thursday of each month. The Director himself was to use it for his

own spiritual reading on Sundays and Thursdays. Until his journey to Provence, De La Salle had this practice observed with invariable constancy, without paying attention to the complaints of some who found this reading annoying. However, to accommodate human weakness and to make the practice of this rule easier, he changed a few expressions which some timorous souls found too embarrassing and which led to scruples in those who were inclined to be so.

In spite of mitigation, the Rule met with a certain opposition from some Directors, for they found it difficult to submit to laws which did not permit them any other use of their authority except in what is necessary to insure the observance of perfect regularity, thereby obliging them to become examples of this virtue themselves. Their self-love was not a little irritated, because the first rank which they occupied in their houses gave them less liberty than the others enjoyed. Their duties, and consequently their faults, were proclaimed publicly every month, since they had to give an account of everything to the Brother Superior and were really the mere executors of his decisions, with no discretionary powers of their own. Humble and obedient men, those eager for their own perfection and for that of others, were delighted by a Rule which made it impossible for them to abuse their authority. By regulating all their conduct by the obligation imposed on them to refer everything to the Brother Superior and not to do anything extraordinary without his permission, it freed them from the terrible account they would have had to give of it at God's tribunal.

In his wisdom, De La Salle closed his eyes to the infraction of several important regulations pertaining to the Directors of the various houses and waited to remedy the problem until his disciples conceived a greater ardor for the perfection of their state. He did not even speak about the matter on his return from Provence or in the assembly of 1717, although that would have been an excellent occasion for calling attention to these points of Rule while he was revising all the rest and, at the request of his disciples, was putting them into their final form. If we may hazard a guess as to the reasons for his silence, it would be that his humility, prudence, and abandonment to Divine Providence led him to say nothing. Humility no longer permitted him to act in any way as the Brother Superior or legislator. He thought he was the one who was drawing down the wrath of God on the Institute and that the best thing he could do for its welfare was to pray and not to have anything more to do with its government.

De La Salle knew that all his efforts had not sufficed to save his Society. After it had more than once been on the point of crumbling, God had revived it and given it a new lease on life. For this reason,

he let the divine hand, which was apparently succeeding in bringing his creation back to the right path, take care of leading it to its perfection. In addition, he wanted the rules concerning the Brothers Directors to be their own creation; they themselves, he felt, should legislate on their own needs. He left it up to their fervor to choose the rules of perfection for themselves, so that being more willingly accepted, their observance might be more meritorious and so that they might subject themselves thereto with greater exactness after having embraced them with greater liberty. The fervor which he could see increasing among his disciples made him hope that it would bring them to this point.

## The Directors eventually adopt their Rule

He was not mistaken, for in the assembly of 1725, which was composed of thirty-two of the principal Brothers, the Directors have already done in part what he would have wished. Those worthy sons, ashamed at seeing such wise and important regulations drawn up by their father falling into disuse, felt inspired to have them receive the honor and obedience they deserved. They decided that the Rule of the Brother Director should be read in public twice a year, once at the beginning of the year and a second time when the Brother Visitor came to make his visitation of the house.

It can be said that here we recognize the perfect disciples of the holy Founder and the heirs of his spirit and virtues. Humble people do not seek to keep their obligations hidden from their inferiors nor to conceal from them the knowledge of the laws which reveal their own shortcomings. On the contrary, they are pleased when their Brothers know what they themselves are supposed to do, so that they may even in this life bear the confusion due them over their faults, be corrected by wise advice, or be kept to the path of duty through the salutary fear of disedifying. The Brothers, thus made aware of the duties of their superiors, are greatly edified by the zeal which they display in carrying out their obligations, and through emulation, the Brothers become more ardent in fulfilling their own Rule. The more regular they see their Director, the more they become such themselves. His obedience to his Rule makes it all the harder for them to dispense themselves from theirs, and he is always in a stronger position to recommend fidelity to the Brothers when his words are backed up by his own deeds.

In addition, when inferiors know the duties of the one who governs them, they become the witnesses, the censors, and the judges of

his conduct. He fears their eyes, their tongue, and their pen, and he resolves to do through the love of God what he might be tempted to do out of human respect. The Director, who must watch over the others, has as many censors over himself as he has inferiors, and they render him much the same service as he renders them. Their presence reminds him of what he ought to do. The public reading of the Rule prescribed for him will bring him either the approbation of his Brothers or the opportunity for humbly confessing his shortcomings. Thus, by accusing himself and admitting his faults, he makes up for the disedification he may have given them and obtains God's pardon.

Let us, then, conclude that nothing but the spirit of pride could take offense at the reading of the regulations or be mortified by it. A humble Brother will always take pleasure in such reading and will seek reparation for his faults in this publication of his duties. A truly obedient man, far from wishing to command without wanting to obey, is delighted to establish his right to command on his own obedience and by his example to preach submission, the spirit of dependence, and fidelity to the Rule. If in their houses the Brothers Directors are like older brothers in a family, do they not owe their younger brothers the example of complete fidelity to all the wishes of their father? If they are subordinate pastors in the Institute, must they not base the authority they exercise on entire submission to higher authority? If they are the protectors and guardians of regularity, must they not show themselves lovers of the Rule which the holy Founder prescribed for them? Can they dispense themselves from their obligations and still be considered the defenders of the common rule?

No man will have the grace to command if he does not possess the virtue of obedience. He will never convince his inferiors that he loves regulations if he himself neglects them. If he feels that publicizing his duties is humiliating for him, he shows that he must not be faithful to them. If he were faithful, reading them would be a eulogy of his conduct and would provide him with a certificate of good conduct. If he considers the frequent reading of the regulations which should govern all his actions as a tacit reproach for his own faults, he shows that he is neither humble enough to admit his shortcomings nor obedient enough to love dependence, not penitent enough to want to correct himself nor virtuous enough to want to let himself be governed in all things by the laws drawn up for him.

For myself, I can never believe that the holy Founder in heaven will ever consider as a faithful disciple of his the Brother Director who neglects the wise regulations he left him. Such a son dishonors his father and refuses to conform to his desires. If he considers them to be

impractical, he accuses the Founder of harshness and lack of discretion. If he considers them too perfect, he confesses his own slackness and want of fervor. If he agrees that they are wise and mild, he must either bring himself to observe them or admit that he is dishonest. Finally, all the Brothers, especially the older ones and the ones who hold some position, all the true disciples of the holy Founder, should zealously work together so as not to leave his work unfinished and to give him in heaven the joy of seeing all his laws punctually observed on earth.

As the Brothers did in that assembly, Directors will make it their pleasure and duty to put into practice what De La Salle asked them to do during his life. They will read their particular regulations as often as possible and make them their spiritual reading. For their regularity to be perfect, it must include fidelity to this last point. Their example will make agreeable the obligation which they will impose on themselves. Indeed, which Brother Director would wish to distinguish himself by obvious signs of pride when he knows that all the others publicize every week the laws that they have received from their Moses? Obedience is a token of the respect they owe to his Rule; if they fail to pay it, they leave the task to him. Justice and gratitude should lead them to give good example to the other Brothers and to afford De La Salle in heaven his deserved satisfaction.

Moreover, what more authentic sign is there of divine inspiration in all the regulations made by De La Salle than the care that Divine Providence has taken to justify them, to re-establish them, and to consecrate them by the approval of the Holy See? We have seen above that the holy Founder's rivals, more opposed to the Rule and practices of virtue in which he trained his disciples than to his person, treated them as being either too perfect or too difficult, exaggerated, and impractical. Was it not under this pretext that they had slandered him at the archdiocesan chancery and made every effort to remove him and to prejudice the Brothers against his government? As we have seen, when they finally became masters in his house after he left Paris, they brought their own spirit and a new form of government into it and altered the Rule.

After their vain triumph, what happened? God snatched victory from the hands of those who had abused it, and before he died, the servant of God beheld the changes introduced into his Community nullified, reduced to nothing. The Founder saw the former discipline flourish again as before, saw fervor revive, the Rule accepted and confirmed by the body of the Brothers themselves. As the sequel will relate, the Rule was ultimately approved by the Holy See. Can we not

say that the hand of God is manifested and that the Holy Spirit clearly showed that God was the author of the regulations that De La Salle left to his Institute? If that is so—and who can doubt it?—we cannot hold that the Rule was only half inspired. If his sons cannot doubt that the Spirit of God himself, by the pen of their Founder, wrote the regulations which he prescribed for them, they must follow them all to the letter, without exception, without modification, without distinction. The Directors must give the example. The fidelity they show for the special regulations given them will strengthen the zeal and the exactness of all the others in observing the Common Rule.

## The action of Divine Providence in regard to the Rule

I must also mention here some signs of special approval on the part of Divine Providence in regard to the rules of the Institute. Toward the end of 1713, the Brothers, disturbed over the absence of their Founder, not knowing where he was, and having almost lost hope of seeing him again, undertook to have their regulations approved by His Eminence, Cardinal de Noailles. This idea had been suggested to them by Abbé de Brou, who—acting as the ecclesiastical superior of the Brothers in the absence of De La Salle—showed great concern for all their interests. The incident which gave rise to this initiative was the kindness that the prelate showed the Brothers of the school at Saint-Denis, when he went there to administer the sacrament of Confirmation, and the singular esteem he then displayed for De La Salle. After asking about his health and his whereabouts, the cardinal praised him before the entire gathering, adding that he was indeed a saintly person and a great servant of God. He asked the Brothers to give De La Salle his kindest regards.

De La Chétardie, the parish priest of Saint Sulpice, aware of these tokens of the cardinal's interest in the Institute, went with Abbé de Brou to thank him and to beg him to take this work under his protection. Later, De Brou took Brother Barthélemy and another Brother to pay their respects to His Eminence, who received them most graciously. The prelate inquired which of the two Brothers was the Superior, and having been told, he questioned him very gently, asked if he had many novices, and recommended to him to train good schoolmasters.

It was this kindly attitude of the archbishop toward the Institute which suggested the idea of asking him to approve the rules. Once this action was decided upon, Brother Barthélemy, on the advice of Monsieur de Brou, called together the Brothers of Paris, Versailles, and

Saint-Denis to decide on any changes which they thought needed to be made in the regulations. For so long a time, the rivals of the holy priest had exaggerated their difficulty to such an extent that they were finally believed by some of the Brothers, not necessarily the most fervent ones.

Once the rules were put in good form, with notations in a separate document, De Brou went to the archbishop and asked him to examine the rules and to approve them. To this the prelate agreed. He then entrusted the task to Abbé Vivant,[33] one of his vicars-general. He kept the documents for seven or eight months. It was during this time that the troubles arose in Paris over the Constitution *Unigenitus* and the refusal of Cardinal de Noailles to agree to it.

As time went on, Vivant sent the documents back to Abbé de Brou with a letter, dated 4 April 1714, in which he stated, "His Eminence does not think that anything should be decided about this matter or signed in his name with regard to the regulations themselves or to the changes which it has been proposed to make in them. He has full confidence in your wisdom for the good government of the schools which you have charge of, and he feels sure that under such wise direction, piety and peace will flourish in them."

There is every reason to believe that the prelate, who considered De La Salle as a holy man and a great servant of God, was unwilling to meddle in the affair during his absence, out of respect for his virtue and regard for his person. The cardinal loved him and did not want to substitute another Superior in his place. He remembered how, in 1702, the Brothers had demonstrated their love for the Founder and their attachment to him, as well as the invincible opposition they had expressed to the intrusion of M. Bricot.

In all these matters, the protection of Divine Providence over De La Salle and over his rules was obvious. 1) Nothing was changed; they remained as they were. 2) Nothing was changed so far as the Founder personally was concerned, and no other Superior was put in his place. The government of the schools was given by the letter of the vicar-general to De Brou but not the government of the Brothers. Thus De La Salle remained their legitimate Superior. No authority other than that of the archbishop could remove him. 3) The proposed changes in the rules lapsed and lost all their authority, not having received episcopal confirmation. 4) The appointment of local ecclesiastical superiors that had been introduced became void of meaning,

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33. François Vivant, whose brother, Jean Vivant, would later on be helpful in securing papal approval for the Institute.

since De La Salle had not been replaced by any ecclesiastical superior. In a word, the cardinal's refusal to deal with the regulations of the Brothers was certainly inspired by heaven, for any approval he might have given would not have helped at all to secure that of the Holy See and might even have prevented it.[34]

## Chapter XVI

*Praise of Brother Barthélemy; heroic examples given by De La Salle at Saint Yon after his resignation; through obedience, he goes to Paris to transfer to the Society the 5,200 livres left to him by a will; he stays at the Seminary of Saint Nicolas, where his virtue shines forth; the testimony of the superiors of that holy place.*

The result of the assembly that we have spoken of was to re-establish discipline, the early form of government, and the former practices, along with the primitive fervor of the Institute. What had been decided at the meeting was confirmed unanimously by the Brothers in the various houses, even as it had been passed unanimously by the Directors who made up the assembly. On his return, each Director told the Brothers what had taken place: the election of Brother Barthélemy and the ratification of the rules in the new revision. The decisions met with entire submission of mind and agreement of wills.

The sorrow of the Brothers over losing De La Salle as their Superior was somewhat alleviated by the choice of Brother Barthélemy to succeed him. Brother Barthélemy was loved because he had a mild, compliant, and easy-going manner; at the same time, he was humble, prudent, and somewhat retiring. Always ready to follow the wisest counsels, he was never attached to his own way of thinking. Not relying too much on his own insights, he was eager to have recourse to the prudence of others. When he consulted them, he did so with great openness and simplicity. He was quite prepared to let a matter be decided by the judgment of others rather than by his own.

The position of Director of Novices, which he had occupied for a long time with great effectiveness, had won for him the confidence of all the younger Brothers who had been trained by him. The role of

34. Suggesting that De Noailles was out of favor in Rome for opposing the Bull *Unigenitus*.

Superior, which he had been exercising in fact for some years with so much prudence, in De La Salle's presence as well as in his absence, had also won for him the hearts of the older Brothers. Everything went on as usual, and it was not easy to see that a new Superior had been selected in the Institute. The only thing new among the Brothers was the emulation they displayed in hastening to send their new Superior their tokens of respect and genuine proofs of submission. The virtuous Brother Barthélemy did not occupy his position for very long, because he died on 7 June 1720, about a year after De La Salle's death and three years after his election.

Still, he remained at his post long enough to give the Brothers ample proof of his virtue and to win for himself a great store of merit before God. He governed during difficult times, and his patience was tried on more than one unpleasant occasion. The Constitution *Unigenitus*, about which men's minds at the time were so overwrought and so divided in France, brought him more than one cross. Not that he took it upon himself to issue dogmatic pronouncements. After De La Salle's example, he never broke his silence on this subject, save when he was obliged to declare his faith or to uphold that of his inferiors. But since several of them lived in dioceses where Quesnel boasted a large number of adherents, the blows aimed at the Brothers fell upon their Superior. Pens skilled in writing in a style that was harsh, bitter, and venomous sent him letters filled with invective and threats. Tongues practiced in spreading lies and in ruining reputations while recommending charity honored him, as they honored so many others, by hurling at him the most odious epithets and the most biting insults.

The zeal that Brother Barthélemy displayed in keeping his Brothers firmly united with the Holy See and submissive to the majority of the French clergy was the only motive for their anger at him, but he considered their opposition an honor and acted with so much wisdom under these attacks that if his enemies could not love him, they could not at least refuse him the tribute of praise which he deserved by his meek, humble, and prudent conduct. By his equanimity and the serenity of his countenance, he strove to keep his pains and infirmities hidden, even from those who lived with him. He did not let it appear that he was hurt either by the outrages which he so often received from without or by the importunities and even the harsh treatment he sometimes received from certain indiscreet persons.

To complete his encomium, let me add that he never forgot who he was in respect to his predecessor. He always remembered the gulf that separates a priest from a layman, the master from the disciple, the

father from the child, the second Superior of the Society from its Founder. A docile disciple, he spoke only because the master was resolved to keep silence. A submissive son, he took over the government of the family as an elder brother only when the father had turned this duty over to him. As a simple Brother, he never lost sight of the sacred character which raised De La Salle above him; he never performed any act of authority in his presence except with embarrassment and when obliged to do so by the humility of the one who had left the first place only to be sure of never leaving the last one.

In spite of De La Salle's firm resolve not to take part in any business, he could not prevent Brother Barthélemy from turning to him every time he felt the need of his insight. The Brother Superior did nothing without consulting De La Salle and followed his advice with the docility of a child. If De La Salle spoke to the Superior with all the respect and deference of an inferior, the Superior followed the example he had before his eyes and seized the opportunity of humbling himself, in his turn, before the one who gave him such an example of this virtue. By this modest, humble, and prudent conduct, the new Superior showed himself a worthy son of the holy Founder and acquired the veneration and trust of the Brothers.

These reciprocal examples of humility, union, and good understanding between the two highest authorities in the Institute produced the most desirable effects. They reinforced the union among the other members of the body and encouraged emulation among the inferiors; the whole family returned to its early spirit and its former fervor. That is what the Brothers owe to the wise government of their second Superior, who died full of merit and whose passing was regretted by all who knew him.

## De La Salle in retirement

Once De La Salle had attained the condition of an inferior which he had so long and so ardently desired, he no longer thought of anything save of fulfilling the obligations it imposed and of practicing the virtues it required. He reserved to himself no mark of distinction, and as a reward for all he had done for the Brothers, he wanted nothing but the right to practice submission and dependence. The only privilege he demanded was to be forgotten, slighted, and permitted to die in this state of abjection in which he had spent his entire life since the establishment of the Christian Schools. He could be seen, like the most fervent novice, punctually observing the most insignificant details and following all the regulations with scrupulous exactitude.

The Founder no longer remembered what he had once been nor even what he still was, save to draw thence new grounds for confusion and humiliation. The titles of Founder and Superior which he had found onerous and crucifying were so completely effaced from his mind and from his behavior that it seemed he had never possessed them and that he had never had anything else to do all his life but obey. As for his sacerdotal quality, he let it appear only when he ascended the altar and when he sat in the tribunal of penance. These were the only functions that he reserved to himself: to say Mass for the Brothers, to hear their confessions, and to address exhortations and instructions to the boarders. In all else he behaved like a priest who has been deprived of his functions, like a minister of the altar who has been condemned to spend the rest of his life doing penance in a monastery.

With this in mind, he refused all demonstrations of confidence which the Brothers offered him and which they could not help showing to the wise and virtuous father who had brought them up. *I am nothing; go to the Brother Superior*, he said to those who came to him asking for permissions. When others wrote to him to ask his advice, he would not even read the letters. If he consented to do so later on, it was only through obedience, considering as an order the request of Brother Barthélemy asking him to do so. His answers to those who had consulted him were of a sort to correct his correspondents for their supposed fault, for he concluded the advice he gave them by saying, *Take care not to address yourself to me on such topics again. You have a Superior; you should lay your difficulties before him. As for myself, I do not wish to interfere any more in anything; I want only to think of death and to bewail my sins.* Thus the saintly priest closed his life in abjection, obedience, and dependence.

Brother Barthélemy was embarrassed on seeing De La Salle so often at his feet to ask for the slightest permissions. Because he wished to spare him the inconvenience of this behavior and himself the confusion of commanding a priest, his confessor and father, he gave him a general permission to do anything he thought proper. But such a perfectly obedient man could not agree to that. It robbed him of the merit of all acts of humility, which displeased him, so he did not wish to make use of this permission. To confirm by his actions the teachings he had given his disciples on this subject, he used to ask permission for the least thing.

The Founder never presided over any community exercises, not even spiritual exercises such as vocal or interior prayer, where his sacerdotal character conferred a certain preeminence on him. The

place he occupied during these holy exercises was that of the publican: the last place nearest the door. He did not venture to change the hour of Mass without express permission. When he went to recreation with the serving Brothers, it was on condition that one of them should preside. The presiding Brother, whom he now considered as his superior, beheld him asking for permission each time he wished to speak. If they tried to show him any special mark of distinction, he would at once withdraw and finish the recreation with one of the young boarders.

As much as they tried to have De La Salle occupy the first place in the refectory, they never succeeded on this point in overcoming his humility, which aspired only to the last place; he took his seat among the serving Brothers. Only with difficulty did they prevail on him to bless the table. If he gave in to this request, it was only because they showed him that his priestly character did not permit a Brother to give the blessing in his presence. When one of the novices came to sweep his modest cell and asked his permission to do so, he replied, *I don't want anything, my dear Brother; go find out whether they want me to go outside.* He would never have allowed anyone to do him such a service of humility and charity if the Brother Superior had not ordered it.

Finally, this saintly priest was for the Brothers an accomplished model of perfection. Each act he performed was an example of virtue. Humble, submissive, obedient, simple—he had reached that happy stage of spiritual childhood which Jesus Christ himself praised. Relieved of his burdens and able to concentrate on himself, he made his own sanctification his only concern. Whatever the world could offer meant nothing to him. He could no longer turn his thoughts aside from God, from whom nothing could distract him. Since his own perfection was his sole aim, he sought it without ceasing, without allowing even the slightest occasion of furthering it to escape him, as the Wise Man advises. I would not be saying too much if I affirmed that those venerable ancients of the famous monastery described by Saint John Climacus, who obeyed their superior like children, would have found a master of humility and obedience in De La Salle and could have modeled themselves after him in this style of living. The more the saintly priest sought to humble and to belittle himself, the more God took pleasure in enlightening him. The fact which we are about to relate shows that the state of abjection is also a state of enlightenment and the true school where Jesus Christ imparts it.

## The proposal for a foundation in Canada

Monsieur Charon, a very zealous man and one of the founders of the Hospice of Canada, had come to Paris on various business matters. He strongly insisted on having four Brothers and on bringing them back with him to that country. His pleas were finally heard. Brother Barthélemy gave his consent, De La Salle agreed, and in concert with the Brother Assistant, who was called to Saint Yon especially for this matter, they chose the Brothers whom they destined for this mission. Two days later, when the Brother Assistant was about to return home, he went early in the morning to say good-bye to the servant of God. He was much surprised to hear De La Salle say, *Oh, my God! What are you about to do? You are going to undertake something which will cause you an infinite number of complications and which will have disastrous consequences.* Brother Barthélemy, who had come in just then, stated that there was no way to back out now, that everything was agreed upon and settled. In fact, the money had already been paid for the expenses of the voyage.

But the saintly man simply repeated, *What are you about to do?* Then he said no more. This repeated remonstrance so impressed the Brothers that they did not proceed any further in this matter. After breaking off the project, they did not have long to wait before finding out that the whole business was a pious fraud. The good M. Charon admitted that he had planned to place the four Brothers in separate localities, with four country parish priests, to teach the children there. In other words, he wanted to detach these Brothers from the Institute and expose them to lose their vocation or to be cast adrift. They would surely have been lost to the Society, since they would no longer have had either contact or relations with it. They would really have left it by ceasing to live in community and to practice its rules. In a word, as we have seen previously, De La Salle never wanted to send his disciples to country schools, because he would have had to dispatch them singly and abandon them to their own conduct.

The Brothers chosen for the Canadian venture were four men distinguished by their merit and virtue, since that is the sort of person needed for working among the Iroquois and the savages. De La Salle felt that they would be lost to him if they were sent. It was no doubt thanks to a supernatural inspiration that he found out about what was proposed. How else could he have foreseen the future and have read into the heart of M. Charon? The latter was obliged to substitute other persons for the Brothers, but he did not bring them with him to Canada, since he died on his return journey. He had secured from the king

letters patent for six schoolmasters, but his death led to the failure of the whole scheme, and his plans were buried with him.

## Popular reaction to De La Salle's resignation

Meanwhile, the news of De La Salle's resignation had reached Paris, and on every side, people judged him differently, each one speaking of the matter according to his own dispositions. Esteem and praise from men had not often been his lot, and it was rare that anything he did met with anything but blame. His latest gesture was condemned by all those who knew him. Some said that he was demeaning his priestly character by subjecting himself to persons who lacked it. They had not remembered that Saint Anthony, Saint Hilarion, Saint Pachomius, and so many other abbots who were not priests were at the head of an infinite number of solitaries and monks, among whom there were priests, and that priests accepted obedience like the others. If they had recalled that Saint Francis was only a deacon, yet numbered among his disciples priests and even doctors of rare merit, they would have dropped this accusation.

Others taxed the Founder with imprudence and considered him guilty of ruining his Institute by entrusting it to a simple Brother. Some accused him of laziness or pusillanimity and attributed to him a love of repose and, by his fleeing from the work, a preference for a state of undisturbed tranquillity over a position surrounded by cares and difficulties. His enemies gave an even more sinister twist to his action. According to them, his subtle and refined pride was at the bottom of it all. He sought in the lowest place the esteem and praise of men which he had not been able to secure in the highest. The servant of God, who thought only of preparing himself to face God's judgments, paid scant attention to all these comments from men. God alone was his entire preoccupation, and all the chatter that went on about him seemed to him like so much nonsense. He laughed when he was forced to hear about it.

While the servant of God was thus entirely taken up with the repose and the solitude where he could occupy himself with the thought of heaven and with putting his soul into that state of purity needed to enter the divine sanctuary, he received a letter which called him to Paris to collect a legacy left to him. It was not a gift; it was restitution made by Monsieur Rogier, who in the past had been so intimately associated with him in works of piety and who had lent his name for the purchase of the house at Saint-Denis of which we spoke previously.

## De La Salle returns to Paris to collect a legacy

De La Salle reached Paris on 4 October 1717, in obedience to the orders of Brother Barthélemy, who had strongly urged him to secure for the Society the restitution of the money, which had been made to look as though it were a donation. He took up lodging in the celebrated Seminary of Saint Nicolas, a revered institution in which many ministers of the altar were trained and from which so many saintly priests came. He did not want to stay at the Brothers' house, fearing the tokens of submission, respect, and confidence which his children owed their father and which they were quite prepared to offer him. Perhaps, too, he wished to avoid reawakening the animosity of some of his rivals, an animosity which had not yet died down and one which might have provoked new trouble for the Brothers.

In the Seminary of Saint Nicolas du Chardonnet, De La Salle showed himself, as he did everywhere else, the perfect priest. As a star, he had gone to shine in a different heaven and to shed rays of ecclesiastical virtues and spirit in a place which was one of the sources thereof. Let us listen to one of the superiors of that seminary on this subject. Here is the letter he wrote to Brother Barthélemy after the death of the servant of God.

"We are most pleased, dear Brother, to learn that you intend to give to the public the life of De La Salle, your venerable Founder. The clergy will be edified by the outstanding examples of virtue which he provided and especially by his zeal for the instruction of youth and the establishment of the Christian Schools. We enjoyed the honor and the advantage of having this holy priest with us in our seminary from 4 October 1717 to 7 March 1718. As you see, the time was short, but it sufficed for us to recognize in him the special gifts God had given him and the graces which he strove to keep hidden from men. We observed in him especially an extraordinary zeal and fervor for his perfection, deep humility, and a great love for mortification and poverty. Zeal for his own perfection was manifested 1) in the fact that not content with being present every day without exception at all the spiritual exercises—morning interior prayer, spiritual conferences, the Divine Office, and the like—he further mentioned to me that he spent two and a half to three hours daily in meditation; 2) in the entire dependence on the seminary rule in which he wished to live, for he was always the first to go to the exercises, and for him there was no unimportant point of rule. He would not have wanted—I do not say to go out into the city—even to speak to an outsider without asking for permission.

"In vain did I tell him several times that he enjoyed all permissions in our house and that this point of the regulations did not apply to him. It was impossible to make him accept any such dispensation. His humility seemed equally admirable to us, and it was universal. He did nothing without asking for advice, and the opinions of others always seemed to him better than his own. In conversations, he listened more willingly than he spoke, and never was he heard to say anything to his own praise. Filled with horror and scorn for the worldliness which a number of ecclesiastics show in their external behavior and in their manner of dress, he kept his own garb most simple and wore clothes made of very ordinary serge.

"All the rest of his external appearance corresponded with this, and that is partly the reason why I said that he loved poverty. His affection for this virtue showed itself in the generosity he displayed in renouncing everything and divesting himself of everything so as to promote the establishment of his Community, in the precautions he took to teach the Brothers who compose it and to perpetuate among them a spirit of simplicity and of detachment from all that is not absolutely necessary for one's life and support.

"His mortification, finally, threw us all into confusion while it also edified us. When he first came to the seminary, he never wished to accept a room with a fireplace, and instead of warming himself with the others, at least during recreation time, he preferred to converse with some seminarian in the halls or in the garden in order to have a chance of suggesting to him some holy thought and detachment from the things of earth. As his modesty, his recollected air, and the unction of his words made it impossible to doubt that he practiced most faithfully what he preached, it is impossible to gauge the good he did in this seminary.

"Some have tried erroneously to represent him as a man with a penchant for some of the new doctrines. Wise and prudent as he was, he rarely spoke of such matters, because he knew that such discourses serve no useful purpose and often cause harm. Nevertheless, he was most submissive and attached to the decisions of the Church. I recall that he warmly approved a community of his Brothers, in a large city in Provence, who preferred to incur disgrace on the part of the highest authorities in the diocese rather than to do what was required of them. It seemed to them contrary to the respect that their Founder had always taught them to profess for the authority of the Holy See and of the Church of France.

"Such, my dear Brother, is the testimony that I feel I owe to the late De La Salle, whose death was deeply regretted by all of us here,

to you, to the public, as well as to our own edification. If God hears our prayers, De La Salle will continue to live in his Community by the fidelity which it will display in never deviating from the maxims and examples of zeal for the instruction of children, for simplicity, poverty, edification, obedience, and profound veneration for the bishops, and so on. I recommend myself to your prayers, and I remain, with complete esteem for your Community and for yourself in particular, my dear Brother. At the Seminary of Saint Nicolas, 1 March 1721."

This letter truly constitutes a thorough eulogy, one which did not come from the lips or the pen of a simple person who is easily edified or who, by a fortunate preconception in favor of virtue, tends to find it everywhere. Ordinary people, on slight appearances, often canonize men who are saints only on the outside, but those who understand what virtue really is do not bestow this title so freely, because they know how hard it is to deserve it. Even ordinary virtue, when it is easily seen, attracts a lot of attention in the world, because it is a light shining in the darkness and because, when surrounded by vices and passions, genuine merit shows up by its uniqueness. But in places where piety reigns, where examples of virtue are an everyday occurrence, where people are striving after perfection, a virtue which appears notable must indeed be eminent. One must be nearly perfect to shine forth among the perfect and to be considered a saint. This is what the reader must keep in mind concerning the letter just cited.

De La Salle lived in that seminary a life so retired and solitary that the persons who knew him could scarcely find him there. He withdrew from everyone's eyes and avoided dealing with others, even with the Brothers, whom he denied the consolation of coming to see him. Only his Brother Director had that privilege, and he was allowed to make use of it only on rare occasions. If some of the Brothers who could not put aside their confidence in him wished to profit by his advice, they had to use some stratagem to surprise him, and when they did so, the first counsel he gave them was to refer to Brother Superior and to get accustomed to doing without him, since he had not long to live. That lesson, so calculated to detach them from his own person, did not satisfy them. Because they could not lay aside their character as his sons, they begged him to preserve his character of father in their regard until death. Ultimately, he succeeded in causing all hearts to be opened toward Brother Barthélemy, and he had the consolation of seeing all the Brothers perfectly submissive to the one whom they themselves had chosen as their Superior, of seeing them faithful to reveal their inner dispositions to him in all candor, to honor him with perfect confidence, and to follow his advice faithfully.

De La Salle had been summoned to Paris to conclude the business of the legacy of which we spoke. He went to a notary, who read to him the article that concerned him. In it he was referred to as the Superior of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. That title, which he felt no longer belonged to him, alarmed his humility and seemed to him contrary to the truth. After answering that he was no longer the Superior of the Brothers, he added that he could not use a title which he no longer possessed, and he refused to sign the document in that way. In vain, the notary pointed out to De La Salle that the title was not important, did not deserve any attention and still less any scruple on his part. Nevertheless, he added, it was necessary to use it, since the acceptance had to be couched in the exact terms contained in the testament.

The humble priest, as strongly attached to truth as he was to abjection, continued to resist. Unable to bring himself to use a title to which he no longer had a claim, he preferred to renounce his right to the legacy rather than to receive it at the expense of truth and humility. So he withdrew, leaving the money in the hands of the notary, who persisted in refusing to give it to him except in the terms laid down in the will. Three months went by this way, during which it proved impossible to constrain the humility of the servant of God. Finally, the notary, edified by this resistance, came to the conclusion that he could perhaps allow the omission of the word Superior without having to fear any untoward consequences. He felt sure that this kind of conduct would not be emulated very often and that if he had met one man ready to refuse money and an honorable title—and to refuse the one because of the other—he would not soon see a second case of that kind. That was how De La Salle finally signed the receipt of acceptance and received under the guise of a donation what was really an act of restitution.

## Acquisition of the property at Saint Yon

About the same time, Divine Providence, which destined the property of Saint Yon for the Brothers, caused events to turn out in such a way that what seemed foreordained to drive them away from their beloved solitude was what put them in possession of it. The Marquise de Louvois, who owned the house, died. Her heirs sent word to the Brothers to vacate the property as soon as possible and to return it to them. The Brothers, who had been living there for fourteen years, were surprised and disappointed; their Founder felt the same way. There seemed no possibility of finding another place so well suited to

the young Society, situated like this one on the outskirts of one of the principal cities of the kingdom. Of all the places that commerce and industry cause to flourish, this was the one nearest Paris, for which it was actually the port and warehouse.

The property, which they had rented so cheaply, enjoyed pure, fresh air, very different than that of Rouen. It was in the country and had large gardens favoring both the piety and the health of the Brothers and offering them an agreeable place of retirement. De La Salle was delighted to stay there, because he could remain as solitary as he desired and because no other location was so suitable for the novitiate. After having been forced to transfer it from one place to another, he had established the novitiate at Saint Yon permanently, and he desired that it should not leave there, unless Divine Providence brought it to some similar place near Paris, the heart of the kingdom, which is also the center of all good works and the place in France where the Brothers find the most favor, success, and resources for their development.

Faced with the unwelcome necessity of giving up on short notice a house so beloved and so necessary, father and disciples had no other recourse than to turn to God, for no consideration could be expected from the heirs. When there is property to be divided up, nobody wants to speak of doing favors. De La Salle exhorted his followers to abandon themselves to Divine Providence and to hope against hope that they might yet see themselves in peaceful possession of a place which seemed made for them. He even told them that they should consider buying it. This surprised them, for the extreme poverty which had accompanied them ever since their foundation had not deserted them. Lacking revenue and money, they had sought their daily sustenance in the granary of the heavenly Father. De La Salle knew better than they that none of the houses of the Institute had any money; they could only honor the intentions of Divine Providence. So it was from that source alone that they should expect the funds needed to buy the house at Saint Yon.

To win such a blessing, prayers were not spared. The great desire of the Brothers to have the house lent ardor to their supplications, and in the end they were effective. De La Salle found in the treasure house of our common Father enough money to conclude the purchase. The first sums came from the legacy which we mentioned above; the rest was furnished by generous people who were interested in helping the Institute. All came about in such a way that the hand of God clearly appeared, for it was just at that time that the article of Rogier's legacy concerning De La Salle came up for execution.

The old servant who was to enjoy, in the first place, the 220 or 250 livres of income from the estate of Monsieur de Plancy had died, leaving the right to this money to our holy priest. It was an annuity, not a lump sum such as was needed to purchase Saint Yon. However, God provided the money by inspiring De Plancy to offer to pay the capital instead of the annuity which was due. Charity alone was the motive which inspired this offer; it was only to be helpful to the Brothers, who needed ready money, as this gentleman learned, that he agreed to donate the principal. His proposal was accepted with great joy, and the funds were used to make the down payment on the property of Saint Yon, which was eventually purchased.

Divine Providence also favored this acquisition in a very obvious manner, because Abbé de Louvois, the testamentary executor of his mother's will, was eager to do a favor for De La Salle. De Louvois promised the Brothers to give them the first option to buy the place and offered it to them at a very reasonable price so as to make its purchase easier for them. As we have already mentioned, the name of De La Salle was venerated in the entire family of the former prelate of Reims, Archbishop Le Tellier. De Louvois, aware of who and what the Founder of the Christian Schools had been and was, of what he had done and suffered, considered him a saint and was delighted to have a chance to do him a favor.

Still, despite all De Louvois's goodwill toward the servant of God, the enemy of all good came near foiling his generous dispositions through the intrigues of some people who wanted to include in the contract certain clauses for their own advantage which would have proved very disadvantageous to the Brothers. The projected contract had been broken off twice, and the transaction seemed to have failed. Finally, after two months of uncertainty, it was brought to a satisfactory conclusion, and the property of Saint Yon was acquired under the names of two of the principal Brothers.[35] De La Salle did not want his name mentioned in the deeds. Content with having the merit before God, he did not want to have the honor before men and took care to hide his name, although he was the one who furnished the money that closed the deal. For this, he sent Brother Barthélemy to Paris and gave him the legacy which had been left to him, together with an act by which he renounced this legacy in favor of the Institute.

His joy was great indeed on seeing his children in possession of a property so favorable to recollection and prayer, so convenient for

35. The Institute, as such, was not yet a legal corporate entity and could not buy, sell, or own property.

the novitiate, and so necessary for his Institute. It was, however, only after his death that the Brothers gained undisputed possession of the place, thanks to the letters patent granted them by the king. In the meantime, they were often disturbed and several times were alarmed, both from within and from without, on the subject of this purchase. People eager for gain and incited by the malice of others were working underhandedly to put the Brothers out. They did not despair of seeing the property fall back into their hands some day. They felt that it had been torn from their ancestral heritage and that their avidity gave them some right to it.

Moreover, one of the Brothers in whose name the house had been bought died, leaving his property rights to the other Brother.[36] Although the survivor had too much religious spirit to be tempted to take advantage of the situation for his own profit at the expense of the Society and to appropriate the domain for which he had merely lent his name, still it was something to be apprehensive about. There had already been an example of such dishonesty among the Brothers, as the reader will recall. The letters patent put an end to the alarms and worries by confirming the Brothers in the ownership of Saint Yon.

## De La Salle is urged to return to Saint Yon

The peace and quiet that the founder of the Brothers enjoyed at the Seminary of Saint Nicolas du Chardonnet attached him to the place, so that it was not easy to get him away from it. Considering himself a mere novice in the pursuit of perfection, he thought that the seminary was just the right place for him. Over sixty-five years of age, he needed to begin again, like a young cleric, to acquire the ecclesiastical virtues, thinking that he had not yet reached the first degrees thereof. Thus, less important in his own eyes, more submissive, and more docile than a young man who has just been tonsured and who comes with juvenile ardor to draw from seminary life, as from its source, the true ecclesiastical spirit and to allow himself to be trained in piety by experienced masters, he wished to renew in the Seminary of Saint Nicolas the practices of fervor which he had learned at Saint Sulpice when he was sixteen or seventeen years of age and to close in the house at Saint Nicolas the life of dependence and of interior abnegation which he had begun at Saint Sulpice.

De La Salle's entire ambition was to die like Jesus Christ in the practice of obedience, humility, and mortification. Hence his heart

36. Brother Barthélemy had died; Brother Thomas was the other Brother.

kept him bound to a spot where he found it easy to exercise these virtues. Such ties which the purest virtue weaves were not easy to break, and the Brothers were not heeded when they urged the servant of God to come back to them. They had at their head a Superior General elected from their own ranks, one whom they themselves had chosen. He was wise, and his conduct corresponded with the opinion everyone had of his solid virtue. They had at last become proprietors of a stable establishment very well suited for the novitiate. Once these two goals had been achieved, the holy Founder had nothing more to do in the Society. If he were to go back to Saint Yon, he felt he would be occupying a place uselessly. That was what he replied to those of his children who begged him to give himself back to them.

Brother Barthélemy, who agreed with his good father in everything else, did not share his views on this point. Thinking that De La Salle's presence was more necessary than ever for the Institute, he suffered grievously in being deprived of it and used every means to shorten the time of the Founder's absence. He feared lest being already rather advanced in age, infirm, and worn out physically, the servant of God might die outside the bosom of his own family and that other hands might have to close his eyes. Moreover, he and the other Brothers had witnessed for so many years the heroic acts of virtue that their Founder had practiced during his life that they did not want to miss those that would bring that life to a close.

Their reasons were valid, but they were not the kind that carried much weight with the humble Founder or that could have prevailed on him to come home. So Brother Barthélemy was careful not to appeal to them. He insisted, rather, on the fact that it was only proper for the father to live with his children, on the desire of the Brothers to see him among them again, and on the duty he had of not abandoning the Society he had founded. The holy Founder, impressed by such arguments, took refuge in his incapacity to do anything at all. Claiming that he was entirely useless, he wished to persuade the Brothers that the Institute should consider it a blessing from heaven to be rid of him.

I need to be led, not to lead. It is time for me to begin working at my own sanctification after having striven for so long to sanctify others. Since God gives me such a splendid occasion to do so, I must profit by it. If I let it escape, that would be a fault with which I would have to reproach myself for the remainder of my days. I have commanded long enough; the time for obeying has come, and I need to teach you by my example to prefer the state of dependence to that of

authority. I have turned my back, most fortunately, on all cares foreign to my salvation. I am released from all the distractions which interrupt my communing with God. Why should I trouble the sweet repose I enjoy to take up again those solicitudes? After serious reflection, I am much inclined to end my days here.

This refusal only made the Brothers' desire for the return of their holy Founder all the stronger and more pressing. However, seeing that they could not convince him unless they invoked arguments based on authority, they turned to the superiors of the seminary and begged them to use obedience to prevail on De La Salle to come back to his own house, since he wanted to stay in theirs only to be able to practice obedience in all things. The superiors could not turn down this request which, although contrary to what they would have preferred, was so reasonable. Delighted to have with them so saintly a priest, they would gladly have paid him to stay, but his own children were asking them to make him leave. By obliging him to go back to the Brothers, the priests consented to lose him. It was a real sacrifice for them but one they generously made.

The compliment they paid to the holy priest to get him to go back to the Brothers could not have been more gracious or more effective. They told him that as he was the model for the whole seminary, he was a consolation and a joy for them in the Lord, that they considered his stay among them as a favor from heaven, and that to keep him, they would have gone to any length if God's interests and those of the Institute were not opposed to theirs. However, since the two were in competition with each other, the former should prevail over the latter. They felt it to be their duty to point out to him that he owed his presence to his own family. It would be a shame for them to deprive his children of the father whom they still needed. In this case, justice and charity, courtesy and duty, all made it an obligation for them to ask him to give in and to point out that he could no longer keep himself away from his flock without exposing several of those who belonged to it to fall into false ways, without provoking murmurs on the part of some and complaints and tears on the part of all. He should believe what they told him on this subject, all the more since it was only with great reluctance that they presented this request to him on the part of the Brothers and that they were acting as mediators between them and him only at the expense of their own inclinations.

The humble priest did not allow himself to be dazzled by such an honorable and flattering address which came from the heart rather than from the lips and which might have nourished self-love in any

person less solidly established in self-contempt than he. After all, those who spoke thus were men of high merit and distinguished virtue, and it would have been easy for him to feel satisfied with himself on hearing them. At any rate, he replied that since he was incapable of governing, his presence would be useless to the Brothers, while his absence would cause them no harm. He added that since he did not yet know how to obey properly, it was to his advantage not to leave a place where he was only learning how to practice this virtue.

This reply was worthy of him. It was to be expected, and nobody was surprised, but he did not foresee that his own words would be used against him; he did not suspect what would happen next. For they told him that since he made obedience his law, he should do through obedience what was asked of him. Because obedience was indeed his supreme law, he submitted without a word as soon as obedience was invoked. He immediately began to prepare for his return to Saint Yon, where the Brother who had replaced him as Superior was eagerly awaiting him.

It was a sacrifice on both sides when he said good-bye to his charitable hosts. Shared aspirations had brought them together, and virtue was the tie that cemented their friendship. The purer it was, the closer and more cordial it became. The separation was hard on both one side and the other. As they bewailed the departure of their friend, the priests in charge of the Seminary of Saint Nicolas du Chardonnet also regretted losing a saint. They deplored even more the absence of the spiritual benefits that his presence had afforded them and their students.

On his side, the Founder of the Christian Schools departed with extreme reluctance from a place which he regarded as the source of true clerical spirit in France, the site he had chosen as his resting place, where he longed to end his days in submission, dependence, humility, and continual prayer. In short, it was a major sacrifice for him to bid farewell to the virtuous priests, whom he honored as the fathers of so many holy ministers of the altar, men whose zeal, piety, and skill in the administration of the sacraments, in the instruction of the faithful, and in pastoral work give infinite honor to those who trained them.

Before leaving for Rouen, De La Salle paid the Brothers in Paris the visit that they had awaited with so much eagerness. Their joy was great, but it lasted only a short time, for he stopped in to see them in passing and only for a few moments, like Jesus Christ appearing to his Apostles after his resurrection in brief, fleeting moments which left their hearts filled with regret for his absence, mingled with the joy that

his momentary presence afforded them. Perhaps these good Brothers, giving way to their filial tenderness, might have imitated the holy women spoken of in the Gospel who, delighted at seeing their Divine Master alive once more and fearing that they might not be able to enjoy his presence as much as they wished, tried to retain him. The Brothers in Paris might have done the same, I say, if they had known that this was the last time they would see their holy Founder. No doubt, if they had realized that they would not meet him again on this earth, they would have thrown their arms about his neck, bedewed his face with their tears, and obliged him to mingle his with theirs as they embraced him as did the disciples of Saint Paul when they said farewell to him.

At least, all of them eagerly asked him for his last blessing. He hesitated to give it to them and would probably have refused if Brother Barthélemy, in begging him to do so, had not made the request sound like an order. The humble Founder, who considered himself as the least member of the Society and forgot all that he had been, did not dare deny himself a right which he could never lose, however lowly the position he might assume and to whatever obscuring of his priestly character he might have condemned himself, since he could never efface it. So, in the presence of Brother Barthélemy, whom he honored with deep reverence as his Superior, his humility did not permit him to perform this act which is a sign of preeminence, but the same humility, subject in all things to the voice of obedience, made it impossible for him to refuse as soon as the one whose requests were orders for him had spoken. Then, in company with Brother Barthélemy, he left for Saint Yon on 7 March 1718, some thirteen months before his death.

## Chapter XVII

*On his return to Saint Yon, De La Salle thinks only of preparing for death; the nearer death approaches, the more brightly shines his virtue; new examples of humility, obedience, zeal, and charity; persecution follows him even to his deathbed, and his honor receives a final blow when the archbishop of Rouen revokes the faculties granted to him.*

The Brothers at Saint Yon saw their Founder once more as an angel from heaven and welcomed him as they would have welcomed Jesus

Christ himself. His return brought them an increase of joy and of grace; his presence made itself felt by the benefits that accompanied it. Indeed, it was necessary to revive fervor, good order, perfect regularity, the spirit of recollection, silence, prayer, mortification, and obedience, which had suffered some diminution. After his return from Provence, the servant of God had indeed re-established Saint Yon in the peace, union, and tranquillity which had been altered in his absence, but he had not had time to revive the perfection which had reigned there at the beginning. His long absence had brought about at Saint Yon itself the same disorders that it had caused elsewhere.

To restore the primitive fervor of the house, more time was needed. As De La Salle had been called to Paris not long after he had returned to Saint Yon, his stay there had not been long enough to enable the mother of virtues to reconquer its first sway. It is well known how quickly and easily fervor can be lost and how much time and difficulty must be spent before it can be recovered again. We can say, however, that it was gradually coming back to Saint Yon when De La Salle departed for the last time and that when he returned, it reappeared with him. His example, his zeal, and his instructions rekindled the divine fire which he had ignited there before his departure for Provence.

The novices and Brothers of Saint Yon, happy at having recovered their master in perfection, vied with one another in profiting by the limited time they still had to enjoy his presence. It would seem that the Holy Spirit repeated to them the words of Jesus Christ to his Apostles, *Walk while you have the light.* Walk with giant strides in the way to heaven while you have the guide who will conduct you there. Take pains to follow his footsteps with ardor while you have him at your head. Take advantage of the light which his actions and words offer you, lest the shadows of tepidity, infidelity, and cowardice overcome you.

In their midst, De La Salle was like a torch which flared up more brightly as it approached its end. Like another Elias, *his words were ardent; he was all aflame and shone like a star in the firmament.* Entirely concentrated on preparing himself for death, he no longer lived save as a man belonging to the next world. He often spoke of it, and in spite of his attention to repress his soul's aspirations, he could not help allowing it to be seen that he was heartily tired of his exile on this earth and sighed unceasingly after heaven. The weight of years, the weakening of his powers, and the increase of his pain showed him that his end was near and that Divine Providence had destined for him a tomb at Rouen, since God had sent him to die at Saint Yon.

Moreover, the servant of God, feeling himself useless in this world and seeing his wishes finally fulfilled, no longer restrained his desire for death. As it delayed in coming, he begged God, if he so willed, to hasten the moment of his dissolution. For a long time, for too long a time, he had been living with these thoughts in mind. The Spirit of God warned him that it was time for him to go back to the One who had sent him. His task was accomplished; nothing further held him on earth. He desired to be delivered from the prison of his body and to be united with Jesus Christ. His pilgrimage here below seemed long to him, and all his yearnings were directed toward his heavenly country. To make himself more worthy of it day by day, he sought to mark the final moments of his life by some act of virtue. As though he wished to leave to his disciples at every step some trace of his charity, zeal, humility, and obedience, he went about giving examples of these virtues.

De La Salle had so completely forgotten what he had been and what he still was that seeing him, a person might have taken him for what he pretended to be: the least of all. If his garb and tonsure had not shown who he was, nobody could have believed his rank; everyone would have taken him for a serving Brother. Nothing in him recalled what he had been, what he had given up, what he still was, or what was due him. It was entirely against his wishes that the Brothers did not forget, as completely as he himself had forgotten, that he belonged to one of the first families of Reims, that he had been a canon of an illustrious metropolitan church, that he had given up everything—family, home, canonry, and wealth—to follow Jesus Christ.

It was even less possible to recognize by any natural sally which might escape him or by any sudden movement of self-love that he was the first Superior and Founder of his Society, the father, director, and leader of the Brothers. He was so submissive, humble, and obedient that no one could have guessed that he had ever commanded or had ever done anything else but obey. He was seen speaking to the Brother Superior with the respect a child shows to his father and with the reverence he would have displayed at the feet of the Sovereign Pontiff. Nor should his attitude surprise anyone, for this humble priest saw only Jesus Christ in Brother Barthélemy, and he was as little concerned with his own personal qualities as he was attentive to those of that good Brother.

Views of faith had effaced from the mind of the servant of God the idea of what either of them was in himself. He was as unmindful of his noble birth, his dignity in the Church, his learning, and his merit as he was of the fact that the new Superior of the Institute lacked all

these human advantages. To say it all in a word, De La Salle, on his return to Saint Yon, had no other occupation than to abase himself and to obey. The nearer he approached the end of his life, the more there could be seen growing within him this desire of humbling himself and of departing for the next world without bringing along with him anything belonging to the old Adam.

The Brothers, eyewitnesses of all this, beheld this redoubling of his fervor with admiration, but they were frightened by it because they felt it foreshadowed his imminent death. They thought, and rightly so, that this light was about to be extinguished, since it flickered so brightly. In the course of his life, we have seen with what a holy passion he cultivated retirement in order to keep himself in God's company. Hence there was no reason for surprise if in the last days of his life, he was so careful to remain continually recollected.

The Founder's esteem for interior prayer was so great that he judged people on the progress they had made in it. Whoever did not apply himself to it with fervor was not, in his opinion, a very spiritual person, no matter what reputation he might have for virtue. In such a soul, he said, there is nothing great; it enjoys few of heaven's graces and gifts. Wherever the Spirit of God does not reign as master, the natural spirit dominates, and self-love does not yield place to charity. Now it is only through interior prayer that the soul empties itself of self and fills itself with God. His love for this holy exercise made him take up his pen to recommend it and to awaken an attraction for it by describing its advantages and its excellence.

In his little work entitled *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer*, he tried to smooth out the paths of interior prayer by explaining the manner of performing it well. He spoke to the novices every day on that noble subject in order to give them a liking for the divine food which offers a delightful manna to those who have had the courage to persevere while enduring its initial bitterness and aridity. It was after the interior prayer that they made before dinner, a prayer of which he asked them to give an account, that he entered with them into instructive and interesting details. At first, he opened their minds to the mistakes they had committed in it, whether out of negligence or from lack of understanding; then he enlightened them as to the manner in which they should have proceeded. Next, he read them some pages of his book and taught them how to spend the time of interior prayer usefully.

But as he knew that the spirit of interior prayer is not something easily acquired and that success depends on the preparation they bring to it, he taught them how to make interior prayer outside the

appointed time by accustoming themselves to converse with God during the day, by making his presence familiar to them, by watching carefully over their senses, and by applying themselves to perform all their actions for God in union with those of Jesus Christ.

To help them enter into such a spiritual life, he composed for them a collection of choice sayings, lively and ardent sentiments, various instructions—both short and enlightening—and prayers of all sorts. His intention was to furnish them an arsenal of spiritual arms against the suggestions of the evil one and against useless thoughts which, while amusing the soul, fill it with vanities and often, by exciting its passions, leave it empty of God.

## De La Salle's influence on the residents at Saint Yon

Moreover, De La Salle's continual prayer was not a state of idleness, nor was it unfruitful in the house at Saint Yon. All those who lived there felt the influence of the lights and graces which he derived from prayer. The zeal with which it inspired him made him attentive to every opportunity for practicing charity toward the boarders, old and young, who resided in the house under the guidance of the Brothers. He visited the older ones frequently. They badly needed such help. Because of their evil conduct, they had been locked up by the authority of their parents or by court order. They were doing involuntary penance, which, as a rule, helps people very little to amend their lives or to expiate their sins. These young men, blinded by their passions and hardened in vice, were not easy to reach. Often enough, their captivity made them bellicose and difficult to approach. The desire of regaining the liberty which they had abused occupied them wholly and blocked their ears to the pious exhortations addressed to them. If they paid attention and seemed docile and open to good impressions, it was often only through hypocrisy and dissimulation. By pretending to be converted, they hoped to win their deliverance.

It is easy to understand why these libertines were in no mood to hear any talk about God or penance. Persons of ordinary virtue, after all their remonstrances and exhortations, left them exactly as they were before. To win over such souls steeped in sin, it takes persons endowed with a special and superior grace. It takes saints whose approach puts the demons to flight and whose fiery words can melt such brazen hearts.

It did not take long to notice that De La Salle was in the habit of visiting them. True and solid conversions were the sign and the result of his action. First, he won their confidence, so that they turned over

the care of their consciences to him. In the hands of such a charitable and skillful physician, the most desperate maladies of their souls were cured; the most inveterate and seemingly incurable wounds began to heal. Everybody was surprised; the inmates themselves wondered at their prompt restoration. Their conversion brought about their liberation, but some of them did not wish to leave Saint Yon except to enter the cloister. Others, when they returned to the world, made known by their well-regulated and edifying lives that they had the good fortune to find in their prison a saint through whom grace and repentance had been given to them.

The young boarders who were sent to Saint Yon to be educated and trained by the Brothers also felt the effects of De La Salle's zeal. With great kindness, he heard all their confessions; neither their number nor their importunity seemed to weary or bore him. He made himself all things to all men, so as to gain all to Jesus Christ; he became a child to his children and often mingled with them at recreation time. On their side, they were delighted to see him and came thronging around him so that they might enjoy not only the pleasure of listening to and seeing him at close range but also that of showing him their affection. For they truly loved him; he had won their hearts. Then the servant of God, after seizing the favorable moment of giving them some short instruction proper to their age, bade them farewell, to their regret, not wishing to interfere with their innocent amusements. If one or another was lacking in docility or had fallen into some fault, he would take him aside, and by his advice and exhortations, reprimands and encouragement, he would usually leave that person changed or at least touched by his concern.

He heard the confessions of all the Brothers, numerous as they were, once or twice a week, and he did so with such fatherly tenderness that they could not remember them later on without being deeply moved. On Sundays and feast days, he addressed a fervent conference to the Brothers urging them to acquire virtue and to strengthen their fidelity to their vocation.

## Ill-treatment from within the Community

In his solitude, the saintly priest was not shielded from persecution. He found his path still strewn with thorns, both inside and outside the Community. After living for so long on the cross, it was only right that he should die there, after the example of Jesus Christ. Having lost his rank, so to speak, and being nothing any more among the Brothers, he gathered, as he had hoped to do, the benefits belonging to the

lowest place which he had chosen. Some, at times, seemed to overlook or to forget what he had been and what he still was in their regard, and they treated him in a manner that lacked the proper respect. What appears even more surprising and shows that God acts in a special way in dealing with his most distinguished servants, making everything concur to further their sanctification, is that one of his oldest disciples, who had never left the ranks of the serving Brothers, treated the servant of God with haughty insolence without being aware of it. If he had realized it, he would have felt a deep confusion. In fact, the Brother was truly filled with esteem and admiration for his father and considered him a saint. He had always remained inviolably faithful to the Founder in all the critical events we have spoken of. Yet, when he dealt with him, he treated him with arrogance and put the virtue of the servant of God to a severe test.

De La Salle was once invited by a priest in the city, a man with whom he had a close relationship, to say High Mass on Sunday in the parish church. He could not refuse the invitation to dine at the priest's house, because it would have been too far for him to return to Saint Yon. In addition, he did not wish to refuse an invitation from a friend whom he needed to cultivate and who had already done several favors for the Community and was in a position to do more. Yet, on his return home, the humble Founder was reprimanded by the Brother in question, who reproached him with violating the Rule by dining away from the house. On another occasion, the same Brother told the Founder that he was being fed and lodged at Saint Yon out of charity for a penniless priest who was no longer good for anything. On hearing this compliment, the servant of God could not help laughing. The one who had paid it to him had accustomed him to receiving others like it with mildness and serenity.

Another Brother, as ill-mannered as the former and much more stupid, put the humility of the servant of God to the test in another way. This Brother was a false mystic, a real fanatic, a man convinced that he had attained a high degree of interior prayer and was specially favored by God. Enraptured by his chimerical perfection, he considered De La Salle as just another ordinary priest, not sufficiently enlightened to guide him in his supposedly elevated mystical state. I suspect that the Brother would have ventured to dispute first place in the realm of mystical prayer with Saint Teresa and Saint John of the Cross. According to him, heaven had no more secrets for him, and he carried on familiar converse with its inhabitants. The Most Blessed Virgin and the angels paid him such frequent visits that he was no longer surprised on seeing them. All these marvelous favors were granted

him, he said, in a hayloft where he had arranged a sort of oratory for himself. The place, he declared, because of the miracles of grace which occurred there, was so sacred that nobody could enter it save barefooted. He saw himself surrounded with celestial light at the first step he took into it. Waiting for him were various citizens of the heavenly court who had come to see him. Books by Luis de Granada, Rodriguez, or Saint Francis de Sales and other similar authors, whose spirituality was solid and approved, were very elementary, according to him. This eagle, nourished only on heavenly manna and raised so far above the common ways, did not deign to read such ordinary material. Malaval and some of the other Quietist authors were the ones he liked, the only ones he judged worthy of himself.

In vain did De La Salle strive to open the eyes of the poor Brother, duped by his own self-love of the most blatant kind. Possessed by the demon of pride, he scorned the advice of a man whom he rated far below himself in spiritual awareness. The only thing the servant of God managed to persuade him to do was to consult someone else and to reveal to him his interior soul. The superiors called in a canon, a great friend of the Institute,[37] who had the patience to listen, at least in part, to the prideful reveries of the idiot who was enraptured by the prodigies of Satan when he transforms himself into an angel of light. Without being actually deranged, no one could have had such a meager endowment of common sense. He was really impoverished in spirit but not with the spiritual poverty which makes a man truly wise by making him truly humble. He suffered from a lack of intelligence as well as of grace. He spoke only to praise himself and to give others the same exalted idea he had of himself. The canon, surprised at first that this Brother should be seeking advice from an outsider, told him that he had in his Founder a new Moses or a new Saint Paul and that he would not find in any other the enlightenment he could find in De La Salle. But the Brother would not agree with that opinion. Furthermore, he was not looking for advice from anyone but himself. It was not to seek guidance but to cause his interior life to be admired that the fanatic consented to reveal himself. In vain did the canon try to open his eyes to his palpable illusions and to the evident pride he displayed. In vain did he strive to show him his errors and discover to him the operations of Satan in his pretended mystical experiences. The canon was classified by the Brother as one more of those who understand nothing about extraordinary spiritual ways, and his advice was scorned just as De La Salle's had been.

37. No doubt, Blain himself.

Finally, the devil's work was completed. Some days later, the visionary, although a man of mature age, jumped over the walls enclosing the property, losing his hat in the process. He then presented himself at the Abbey of La Trappe, but he found the door shut. Not knowing what else to do, he applied and was accepted out of charity in the house of some nuns, who put him to work sweeping the church and helping the sacristan. A short time later, his life came to an end there, and he was no doubt quite surprised—when death overtook him, he who had thought himself to be richly endowed with grace—to find that he was naked, poor, and miserable. He died as his desertion merited and as his pride demanded: a prey to despair and abandoned by God.

## Difficulties with the archdiocesan authorities

Outside the Community, De La Salle had much to suffer from his ecclesiastical superiors. Archbishop d'Aubigné of Rouen treated him with a harshness which has few parallels, and so did his vicar-general. The latter, although of a mild and obliging character, declared himself the enemy of the servant of God and did him all the evil turns he could. His position gave him many opportunities to do so. We can recognize in such treatment that God is pleased to make use of all kinds of hands to work at the sanctification of his elect and that even the just, at times, persecute other just men.

Among the many illustrious bishops whose virtue shone brightly, I dare say that France contained no other more pious, more regular, more zealous, more laborious, or more exemplary than Archbishop d'Aubigné. Yet it was that worthy prelate, still so deeply mourned in the archdiocese of Rouen by good Catholics and virtuous priests, who strewed De La Salle's path with sharp thorns and treated him as the most unworthy priest of this vast diocese.

The archbishop, who had been the vicar-general of Bishop Godet des Marais at Chartres, had given to De La Salle and to the Brothers at that time all sorts of tokens of his esteem and his kindness. But, as we mentioned earlier, he allowed himself to be so strongly prejudiced against them by the secret enemy of the servant of God that he would neither see the Brothers nor hear them spoken of. When the holy priest came to Rouen, he did not fail to present his respects to the archbishop, but he was always badly received and had to put up with his lack of consideration. On one occasion among others, the prelate, usually so moderate— even in dealing with ecclesiastics whose lives were a scandal, he respected their state and priestly character while

not sparing their personal shortcomings—addressed De La Salle in unmeasured and harsh language. The humble priest, who was already kneeling, no sooner heard the first words from his superior's lips than he prostrated himself on the floor to receive the rest of the admonition with due respect and humility. When Archbishop d'Aubigné had finished speaking, De La Salle arose without opening his mouth to excuse or justify himself, made a deep reverence to the one who had just treated him so unfairly, and then left. On that occasion, as on all the others, the humble Founder did not proffer a word of complaint or show any sign of displeasure. The Brother who had accompanied him, upset over what he had just heard, saw him leave the chancery as calm and collected as he had been on entering.

The vicar-general of whom we just spoke, far from trying to mollify the prelate and to defend De La Salle, seemed only to incite and embitter him the more. He, too, had allowed himself to be prejudiced against the servant of God by the late parish priest of Saint Sever, who was highly regarded by the archbishop and was indeed a worthy pastor. That priest, as we mentioned, never stopped criticizing the Brothers and their Superior, and as we explained before, he complained everywhere that they did not keep to the terms of the agreement reached between them and him. The agreement had become impossible to observe in certain of its articles, and it was entirely unreasonable to insist on their execution. Yet it was on this point that the priest, no doubt meaning well, continually accused De La Salle to his ecclesiastical superiors.

In vain did the saintly Founder try to point out that he and the Brothers were not violating any of the articles agreed upon, except those that experience had shown to be impossible to keep. In vain did he seek to demonstrate the inconveniences which had already resulted and the disorder which had ensued when they had tried to carry out such provisions. He was never listened to. The other side was not interested in knowing the truth. The vicar-general's prejudices had reached such a point in the last meeting when this matter had been discussed that he charged De La Salle with lying and accused him of that fault to the archbishop. A canon[38] who happened to be present when this imputation was made, indignant at seeing a man whom he honored as a saint blamed for a shameful prevarication, could not help raising his voice to justify him and said to the vicar-general that certainly either De La Salle had not explained himself properly or the

38. Blain, who had been brought to Rouen by Archbishop d'Aubigné when the latter was transferred from the see of Noyon to that of Rouen.

vicar-general had not understood what he said and that a man like De La Salle was not capable of wishing to deceive his ecclesiastical superiors by a vulgar lie. In spite of all that the canon could say, the humble Founder was pronounced a liar and condemned to suffer the penalty for it by being suspended from his priestly functions.

The canon, appalled by this sentence even more than by the accusation, immediately went to the servant of God, who was already suffering from his last illness, and asked him for the correct information about the matter concerning which he was considered to have lied, without informing him of what had happened or warning him of the insulting incrimination against his sincerity. The pious De La Salle explained in a few words and with his usual straightforwardness what had happened, without suspecting that anyone was considering him guilty of lying. He had put the matter clearly to the vicar-general, who had misunderstood and had suspected him of practicing duplicity, had accused him of it, and had condemned him for it without any reason for doing so.

The canon returned with this information to the chancery, but it was all useless. God permitted this trial so that his servant might die, like Jesus Christ, in disgrace. The vicar-general still maintained that De La Salle had lied to him, and he would not listen to any explanation of what had happened. Not willing to admit that he had made a mistake, he had to maintain his story that the Founder of the Brothers was deceitful. The condemnation was then confirmed, and the canon, who had tried to demonstrate De La Salle's innocence, was asked to transmit to him orally the decision to revoke his priestly faculties.

The canon said nothing, since further discussion would have been useless, but he was not at all happy to be charged with such an odious commission, founded on a calumny dictated by false impressions and prejudice. He was not prepared to lend his cooperation to the passion of a man who, although moderate and kindly by nature, seemed to have forgotten on this occasion the gentleness which was so characteristic of him. Moreover, as De La Salle had only a short time to live, it was only right to show him some consideration. Even if he had been guilty of the falsehood imputed to him or of other more considerable faults, it seemed shocking to blacken his honor by relieving him of his priestly functions at the very end of his life. The decent thing to do would have been to let him die in peace with his honor intact. They would not have wanted to offer such an affront or to cause such grief to anyone else.

In addition, what consternation would the suspension not cause in a house like Saint Yon, where there were over eighty persons

whose confession De La Salle heard regularly? What a scandal it would be, or rather, what complaints against authority would such a step not give rise to if it became known? For all these reasons, the canon resolved to keep the matter secret and to leave the entire affair in the hands of Divine Providence. He did not doubt that if he himself said nothing, someone else would be sent to Saint Yon to tell the holy priest that he was suspended. To prepare him for such a blow, the canon warned him that serious trouble was brewing against him at the chancery, that he had not been able to avert it, and that soon the news would be divulged. He said no more. In fact, as those in authority saw clearly that the canon was not willing to act as a messenger, they sent someone else to inform the saintly priest that his faculties had been revoked.

That was two or three days before De La Salle died. The insult did not provoke any outbursts, because the holy priest said nothing about it to anyone and because his death, which followed almost immediately, did not leave any time for the suspension to be made public. The canon, De La Salle's friend, went to see him two days before he died and learned from De La Salle's own lips that someone had come to inform him that his faculties had been revoked. They had asked me, the canon said, to bring you the news myself, but I was in no hurry to carry out such an unpleasant task. I suspected as much, replied the dying man, after what you did me the honor of telling me at your last visit.

He accepted such an ignominious blow, which was his last, without losing anything of his peace and tranquillity. He spoke of it with a cheerful and serene air and seemed not to feel any chagrin or the least resentment over it. One thing should not be forgotten. When some of the Brothers, a few days later, informed the vicar-general of their Founder's death, the vicar exclaimed, *He is a saint! The saint is dead!* He might have added that he himself had fastened the last jewel to the saint's crown. But how can a man with any sense declare someone to be a saint after accusing him of imposture and causing him to be suspended? If this contradiction in sentiments and behavior seems incomprehensible, it is only because God permits the hearts of even good men to grow passionately bitter toward his favorites, but he does not allow them to lose the esteem that their virtue deserves.

# CHAPTER XVIII

## *Last illness and death of De La Salle*

The closer De La Salle felt his death approaching, the more he labored to die to everything and to cause the remembrance of himself to fade from the minds of all, even of his dearest disciples. But in spite of all he could do, he still remained in their hearts what he had always been and should have been: their father, their Superior, their Founder. He could not eradicate from their grace-inspired souls that depth of confidence, tenderness, and openness toward those who have engendered us in Jesus Christ. He constantly spoke to them of death and affirmed that his own was not far off, that they should no longer consider him as among the living and hence should get accustomed to doing without him. He replied in the same vein to those who consulted him by letter. "I beg of you, for the love of God, my dear Brother," he wrote to one of the pioneer Brothers, whose confidence in him he had not been able to diminish, "in the future, do not think of addressing yourself to me in any way. You have your superiors whom you should consult about your spiritual and temporal concerns. Henceforth, I wish only to prepare myself for death, which must soon separate me from all that is created."

Before long, in fact, the Brothers came to fear that his prediction would be fulfilled. The rheumatism which he had contracted long before by his vigils and his austerities and by sleeping on the floor after spending the greater part of the night in prayer had become chronic and would not yield to any remedies, even the most potent ones. The sort of fire torture which we described had given him some relief, but it had not cured him. As the years went by, his pains increased and spread throughout his members, so that at the end, his desire for suffering must have been fully satisfied. The pangs were exacerbated by the continuation of his austerities and his ordinary exercises of piety, for he left none of them aside and treated his body as if it were bereft of sensation, which gave some the impression that he was not really all that sick. They were tempted to believe that a man who never complained and who did not allow the most violent agony to show itself must not be suffering very much.

In fact, all he strove for was to let God alone be the witness of his patience, to suffer in silence, and to hide from the Brothers the knowledge of what he endured. In this he succeeded, because his countenance, which remained always calm and cheerful, serene and

peaceful, on which there appeared not the slightest cloud of chagrin or alteration, made them think that he was without pain when, in fact, he was enduring very sharp pangs. They might have thought he was in fairly good health had the diminution of his strength, joined to the difficulty he felt in moving about, not shown the contrary.

The asthma with which De La Salle had to contend for some time was an additional complication which his fasting aggravated. His various ailments did not prevent him from observing Lent in 1719 with his usual strictness. Although he breathed only with difficulty, so violent was the suffocation caused by the asthma, the Brothers could not prevail on him to try to get some relief or to mitigate his Lenten penances. He answered them *that the victim was ready to be immolated and needed to be purified.* On returning from a trip to Paris which he had to undertake, Brother Barthélemy was no more successful than the others in convincing him, so they had recourse to his confessor and asked him to forbid the holy priest to continue a fast which was putting his life in danger. He submitted to the injunction of his confessor, thus causing the spirit of penance to yield to that of obedience.

Not long afterward, a violent headache resulting from a blow from a falling door, together with a sharp pain in his side, made him truly a sick man. The doctor who came to see him declared that the illness was mortal, and he did not fail to inform the patient. The virtuous priest heard him with a smiling countenance that showed his satisfaction. It was for him a joyful piece of news which he had been awaiting from one day to the next. His sole desire was to leave this earth and to be united with Jesus Christ. The life he led had no interest for him; he wanted to die as soon as possible. He had nothing to lose and everything to gain by death. A man so long attached to the cross of Jesus Christ and crucified with him could face with nothing but joy the demise which would put an end to his suffering and usher in his happiness.

While not entertaining any hope of curing his patient, the doctor tried by every possible means to give him some relief from his sufferings. Although the saintly man knew that these remedies were quite useless, he did not refuse them, for they were very unpleasant and thus furnished him opportunities for offering God the sacrifice of his repugnance. But everything that they tried to do to relieve his pains was unsuccessful. The illness gathered strength and grew considerably. Then he asked the Brothers not to waste any more money and to spare the cost of his treatments. He added that his hour was drawing near and that they should have recourse only to the sovereign Physician, who alone could cure him or afford him any relief.

The discontinuance of the therapy and his abandonment to God made it possible for him to say Mass again and to offer the sacred Victim. Rather, his fervor, which had been impeded by the kind of treatment they had been using on him, found itself at liberty to celebrate the sacred mysteries again and to hear confessions for about a fortnight, in spite of the pain he endured. On such occasions, virtue gives us strength or helps us rediscover the powers that are only hidden, not removed, from the depths of our nature. The great souls that never pay attention to their bodies demand from them, even unto death, efforts which are truly prodigious.

De La Salle's condition was such that anyone else would have remained in bed. To all appearances, he should not have been able to get up, and his incapacity for doing anything should have forced him to stay in bed. But he did not pay any attention, and everyone was amazed at seeing him up and about, doing things and forcing his body to obey him so that he could satisfy his devotion. What is too violent, however, cannot last. Even if virtue can inspire courage and make up for the weakness of nature by redoubled fervor, it cannot, aside from a miracle, restore exhausted strength and bring back to full vigor a body that has been worn out and abused. His illness grew so violent toward the end of Lent that the servant of God was obliged to remain in bed. In proportion as he felt his body growing weaker, his joy increased and shone on his face. *I hope*, he said, *that I shall soon be delivered from Egypt and brought into the true Promised Land.*

## De La Salle celebrates Mass for the last time

The feast of Saint Joseph was drawing near. His special devotion to this great saint, whom he had chosen as Patron and Protector of the Institute, made him conceive an ardent desire to celebrate Mass that day in his honor. He was content with merely desiring to do so, for it did not seem that he could say Mass without a miracle. Still, the favor that the servant of God hoped for—without daring to expect or, even less, to request—was granted to him.

On the eve of the saint's feast, about ten o'clock at night, he felt his pain lessen and his strength return. He was surprised at the change, and imagining that he was dreaming, he did not mention it to anyone. Next morning, he discovered that this sudden improvement was neither a dream nor his imagination, for he felt strong enough to get up and to celebrate the divine mysteries. His joy was great at being able to satisfy his devotion. The joy of his children, who thought he was cured by a miracle of the Almighty, was even greater. All of

them together blessed, praised, and thanked the goodness of God and their patron, Saint Joseph. The saintly man took advantage of this favor and celebrated Mass with the recollection and fervor befitting the last Mass of his life. His free and unconstrained air as he said it made the Brothers believe that God had restored him to health through the intercession of Saint Joseph. They all hastened to ask his advice for their spiritual progress, as though he had been perfectly cured. He answered them for the last time with the ease of a man possessing his full vigor.

After satisfying his piety and that of the Brothers, he relapsed into his former condition. His strength failed, and his end seemed close at hand. Then the Brothers understood, to their great regret, that his health had not been given back to him but merely lent so that he might celebrate Mass in honor of Saint Joseph and satisfy his devotion toward this great saint.

## The visit of the parish priest of Saint Sever

Informed of the danger in which the Founder of the Brothers lay, the parish priest of Saint Sever came to visit him. After assuring him of his sympathy for the suffering he was enduring, he exhorted him to patience. This priest, accustomed to encountering disquiet and apprehension whenever he visited people who were dying, was much surprised and rather disconcerted when he saw De La Salle so calm and so indifferent to whatever might transpire. As though shocked or disedified by this seeming security which the servant of God enjoyed, he thought it his duty to withdraw him therefrom by speaking to him very plainly that death was approaching and that judgment would follow it. *Realize*, he told him, *that you are going to die and that afterward you will have to appear before God. I know it*, replied De La Salle, *and I am entirely submissive to his orders. My fate is in his hands. May his will be done.*

By these few words, the priest understood where the confidence and serenity of the patient came from, and he judged that lengthy remonstrances were not necessary for a man who was entirely absorbed in God and who seemed already to enjoy the happiness of the blessed. He was even inspired to put an end, in peace and charity, to a slight disagreement which he had with the saintly man, who had not been willing to accede to everything the priest wished to require of the Brothers in his parish. The reconciliation afforded the sick man no small consolation.

## De La Salle receives the last sacraments

From that moment on, his heart abandoned itself to his desire for the sovereign Good, and he concentrated all his thoughts on the heavenly Jerusalem. His union with God and his aspirations toward him were unceasing. He requested Holy Viaticum, which he called his passport, and received it with an eagerness which surprised all. The priests of the parish raised some objections to granting his wish, as they did not think he was yet so near death, but eventually they promised to bring Viaticum to him the next day. The delay favored the great desire he had to prepare adequately for receiving Viaticum. He spent the entire night in preparation. As soon as day broke, he gave orders to prepare everything so that he might receive his Lord as worthily as possible. The Brothers did so with as much magnificence as the poverty of Saint Yon would allow. Nothing could have pleased him more, because he wished everything connected with the sacred mysteries to be beautiful and rich.

While the Brothers were getting the house ready for the coming of Jesus Christ, De La Salle was lost in recollection, preparing his heart. At that moment, he once more ignored the fact that he was desperately ill, and in his fervor, profound respect, and ardent devotion toward the Blessed Sacrament, he found the strength to get up from bed. Reluctant to welcome the Prince of Eternity while lying in a bed, he insisted so much on being allowed to rise and put on his surplice and stole that the Brothers could not refuse his request.

Seated in a chair, he awaited the arrival of his Lord and God. When the tinkling of the little bell announced his coming, he could no longer contain himself. Confused at appearing seated before his Creator and his Judge, he gave way to a transport of fervor which caused him to prostrate himself before the host, to adore Jesus Christ, and to annihilate himself in his presence. With a countenance lit up by his excessive joy and ardent charity, he received the Viaticum in the same manner in which he had so often been seen celebrating holy Mass, namely, with seraphic devotion. The flush which appeared on his face gave him a healthy look and made the bystanders think that he was actually better. In fact, some of them showed astonishment that the Viaticum was being given to a man who seemed to be quite well.

It was time to grant this consolation, which was not complete until they brought him the last sacrament, a blessing which he asked for with insistence. He felt his strength ebbing away and knew that the prison of his body had almost reached the moment of its dissolution.

Extreme Unction was administered to him the following day, Holy Thursday; he received it with complete presence of mind, responding to all the prayers. When these were finished, he remained in deep silence for seven hours, entirely occupied with the graces God had just given him. He broke this silence only to satisfy those who surrounded his bed and who wished to witness his blessed death, to receive some advice from him, or to hear some word of edification. He satisfied all of them and even revealed to several of them things hidden in the depths of their souls, revelations which surprised them very much.

A layman who was present, whether out of curiosity or out of piety, wished to try this out for himself and asked the dying man to tell him what he thought of him. The answer was: *You can be saved if you want to be. God is bestowing great graces on you, but you are not profiting by them. You are not going to him as you should. You are hiding the talents given to you.* Nothing was nearer the truth; the man admitted as much and added that the servant of God had read his soul and all that was taking place in it.

## De La Salle's last testament

The Brothers, disconsolate over the loss they were about to experience, hastened to gather his final words. Here is the first article of the testament which he left them: "First, I recommend my soul to God and, next, all the Brothers of the Society of the Christian Schools with whom he has associated me. I urge them, above all else, always to show entire submission to the Church, especially in these evil times, and to give proof of this by never separating themselves in anything from our Holy Father the Pope and from the Church of Rome, always remembering that I sent two Brothers to Rome to ask God for the grace that their Society might always be entirely submissive thereto. I also recommend to them to have a great devotion to our Lord, to love very much Holy Communion and the exercise of interior prayer, to cultivate a very special devotion toward the most Blessed Virgin and toward Saint Joseph, the Patron and Protector of their Society, to fulfill the duties of their employment with zeal and disinterestedness, and to maintain close union among themselves and blind obedience to their superiors, which is the foundation and the support of all perfection in a community."

As he found it very difficult to speak and his voice was growing weaker, the Brothers thought that his agony was about to begin. Then all his sons threw themselves on their knees and asked him to bless them. Brother Barthélemy, raising his voice, besought him to impart a

blessing to all those present and to extend it to all the Brothers of the Institute. At first his humility made him reluctant to do so, but finally yielding to the pleas made to him, he lifted his eyes and hands to heaven and said, *May the Lord bless all of you!* This blessing caused many tears to flow from the eyes of his disciples and opened a new wound of sorrow in their hearts. The realization of the loss they were about to sustain grew stronger as the moment drew nearer. Like loving children who are about to become orphans through the death of their father, they found comfort in their sorrow only in their piety, in their submission to God's will, and in the hope that when their Founder was taken from their sight, he would continue in heaven the services he had rendered them on earth.

## The death of a saint

Toward evening, he began to lose consciousness, as indicated by his disconnected speech. The Brothers then recited the prayers for the dying. When these were finished, the Founder regained consciousness, and he took advantage of this last moment God gave him to inspire his disciples with his own horror of the world. "If you wish to preserve yourself in your state and to die in it," he said, "never have any familiar dealings with people of the world. Little by little, you will acquire a liking for their way of acting and will be drawn into conversation with them, so that through politeness, you will not be able to avoid agreeing with their language, however pernicious it may be. This will cause you to fall into infidelity, and no longer faithful in observing your rules, you will grow disgusted with your state, and finally you will abandon it."

He could say no more; a cold sweat broke out over him and deprived him of speech. At that moment, he entered into an agony which lasted from midnight until half past two the next morning, which was Good Friday. He then recovered slightly, and someone suggested to him the thought of imploring the help of the most Blessed Virgin by this prayer of the Church which he was in the habit of addressing to her daily in his evening prayer: *Maria, Mater gratiae.* Brother Barthélemy, who never left his side, asked him whether he accepted with joy the sufferings he was undergoing. *Yes*, he replied, *I adore in all things the guidance of God in my regard.* These were the last words he uttered. At three in the morning, he fell into agony again, which lasted until four. The agitation which it caused him did not prevent his face from appearing tranquil and reassured. Finally, about four o'clock, he made an effort as though to rise from bed to

go to meet someone. Then, joining his hands, he raised his eyes to heaven and expired. It was Good Friday, 7 April 1719. He was not quite sixty-eight years old.

## Eulogy of the Founder

Such was the demise of the Founder of the Christian Schools, of the saintly priest whom God raised up in these latter times to labor for the instruction and education of the poorest and most neglected youth. If there never was a more necessary and more useful undertaking for Christian society, neither was there ever one which was for so long, so universally, and so cruelly opposed and persecuted. During the nearly forty years the servant of God devoted himself to it with unexampled constancy, he enjoyed hardly a day of peace. His zeal, his trouble, and his courage brought him constantly renewed crosses. Scarcely could he open his mouth without being contradicted, blamed, humiliated, and treated as an indiscreet, stubborn, eccentric sort of person, a vain and proud man. So humble, submissive, and unpretentious did he act that people all thought they had a right to reprehend him, to give him orders, to assume the posture of his judge and his superior. Facing enemies whom hell raised up against him on all sides, he pursued none of them and adopted no defense other than that of humbling himself and yielding. He was inflexible only on the questions of regularity, of keeping the spirit of poverty, of recollection, of mortification, and of the other Gospel virtues which produce saints. He was as docile as a child on all the rest.

Filled with courage in the greatest dangers which threatened him or menaced his Society with imminent ruin, he displayed an unshakable confidence in God, generous abandonment to all the orders of Providence, and a deeper horror for the slightest imperfection than for the greatest evil in life. Whoever so desired could maltreat, humiliate, calumniate, and persecute him in his own person and in that of his sons, yet during forty years, he never opened his mouth to complain. He had become so familiar with affronts, scorn, and injury that he was surprised and thought he was in a different world when compliments were paid to him. Friends and enemies, the great and the not so great, rich and poor, learned men and ignoramuses, saints and sinners, prelates and superiors—and even his own disciples—took up arms and waged cruel war against him. All of them were, in God's hands, the instruments of his sanctification.

Persecuted everywhere, he fled from one city to another, following the counsel of Jesus Christ, and he wandered from province to

province without finding peace anywhere, without discovering a place where he did not meet his Calvary where he was crucified. Ever since he first thought of founding the Christian Schools, what day was there, what spot which for him was not marked by the sign of the elect, the cross, and which he himself did not sanctify by heroic acts of humility, patience, mortification, obedience, or submission to God's will, by abandonment to Divine Providence, or by some other virtue? Could we not say of him, in all truth, what the Doctor of the Gentiles said of himself and of all the Apostles: that he was considered as the refuse of the world? But in the midst of so many crosses, which were as numerous as the days of his life, in the midst of so many contradictions, affronts, outrages, and injustices, who ever saw him upset, sullen, disconcerted, infuriated? Who ever heard from his mouth a single word of bitterness, impatience, or resentment? Who ever saw his countenance altered by the agitation of his heart? Calm, cheerful, recollected, satisfied, gracious, and modest—that was how he appeared in the midst of all the tempests that afflicted him. He emerged from them as unruffled as he did from interior prayer.

How often did he not witness in his own house some of his children rising up against their father, disciples taking up arms against their master, members rebelling against their chief? How often did he not see himself alone—or nearly alone—abandoned, betrayed, persecuted from within and without, encountering hands raised against him on every side? Can we not say that God seemed to take pleasure in setting all persons against him and in delivering the first blow himself? For no matter how pure his intentions were, God seemed to cross them. No matter how holy his projects, God appeared determined to lay them waste. He was able to do hardly anything that succeeded, and if the project of establishing the Christian Schools did finally prosper, how long did it take him, and how did he do it? It took him forty years of pain, labor, and continual alarm, years which he concluded, as he had begun, in ignominy.

If all France so admired Abbot de Rancé, buried in his abbey of La Trappe and reviving there in our day the austerities of the Thebaid, should she not also have congratulated herself on having seen, almost at the same time, a young canon of Reims renouncing his canonry, not in favor of his own brother or of some relative but of a stranger with a reputation for virtue, on having beheld him giving away his family fortune to the poor and condemning himself to a life of abjection, poverty, and suffering and then raising the standard of penance at the very gates of Paris, leading there a life as austere as that of La Trappe and much more humble and poor?

If we compare the life of the Brothers at Vaugirard and at the Grande Maison with that of the celebrated penitents who made the solitude of La Trappe so illustrious and if we ask our own self-love which of these two states we would care for least, I am not afraid of being mistaken if I maintain that if we had to choose between them, self-love, forced to the choice, would prefer the life of La Trappe to that of the infant Society of the Brothers. In fact, although the austerities practiced in the two situations can be viewed as parallel, nevertheless, it must be admitted that at this time, ignominy was as much attributed to the habit of the Brothers as glory was to the reform initiated by De Rancé.

We have seen above that the exercises of penance, mortification, and humiliation reigned with such complete sway in the youthful Institute that the Founder's enemies made such austerities a crime for him and took occasion from them to slander him to the ecclesiastical authorities as a man whose fervor made him imprudent and whose severity knew no mitigation and as a torturer of the human body. They obliged him, in spite of himself, to tone down the great rigor and to discontinue a number of practices which they considered insupportable to human nature. The constraint applied to the servant of God to make him lighten the burden borne by his disciples merely made him add to his own. For as though he wished to compensate God for the maceration which his disciples were forbidden to practice, he reserved them all for himself.

Hairshirts, iron girdles, cruel disciplines, vigils, sleeping on the floor, the most insipid food, frequent and strict fasts, poor clothing, traveling on foot, almost complete abstinence from wine, constantly doing without fire—all these were penitential practices which he could never bring himself to give up. In all truth, we can address to him the reproach which has always been leveled at the greatest saints: that he was the torturer of his own body. Interior mortification completed in him the putting to death of the old man which external mortification can only begin. He was so dead to himself that he manifested no sign of repugnance or of natural inclination. No sudden sally of passion escaped him, let his desires or his fears become known, or showed his resentment or touchiness.

Such perfect mortification, having made him complete master of himself, also established in the depths of his soul a peace which the most trying events of life could not trouble, and his confidence in God added thereto a joy which the whole world could neither give nor take away. When he lacked everything, when everything rose up against him, then did he seem the most assured. He hoped against

hope, and rarely did he hope in vain. Apostolic zeal and generosity inspired all his conduct. Nothing seemed difficult for him when God's interests were at stake. Once he was sure of the divine will, he never gave up what he had undertaken, whatever assaults might be directed against him by the world or by hell. He possessed a special grace for winning over the most hardened sinners; he never undertook the conversion of one of them without succeeding. He had a tender, generous, and sincere heart; he was affable, considerate, and polite. His natural disposition was both tender and firm, energetic and active, but he did nothing hastily and was incapable of cowardly surrender. He took his full time to reflect, but once he had made a decision after mature consideration, he held to it, at least so long as he felt that it was conformable to God's will.

Brought up in the lap of luxury by a wealthy family, by parents who loved him dearly, he seemed to have had in the beginning a very delicate constitution. Nevertheless, his body, inured to labor and to austerity, grew more robust with age, so that as his virtue grew, his health likewise improved. No doubt he would have enjoyed good health, even to an advanced age, had he not undermined it by excessive penance.

He stood a little above average in height, with a frame well proportioned and solidly built. A wide forehead, prominent nose, and two large beautiful eyes, nearly blue, made up his arresting countenance. His features were gentle and agreeable, his voice, strong and distinct. Exteriorly he appeared cheerful, serene, modest, and pious. His skin, somewhat tanned by his long travels, usually appeared slightly flushed. His manners were simple, gracious, and open, without affectation. His hair, chestnut in his youth and curly, had with the years become gray or white and made him look venerable. Finally, grace enthroned, so to speak, on his countenance made him amiable and inspired piety. I dare say that no man in our day looked more like a saint. He appeared as such to all who saw him; he inspired them with the desire of becoming saints themselves. On his approach, people were seized with respect. They felt confused in his presence because they felt themselves sinners and tepid or unfaithful souls. Such is the portrait of John Baptist de La Salle, priest, doctor, former canon of the metropolitan church of Reims, and Founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. Those who knew him will agree that even this portrait is very imperfect.

## De La Salle honored in death

The news of De La Salle's death spread quickly throughout the city of Rouen. Everybody hastened to come to see, for the last time, a man considered a saint although not treated like one. In the end, only death gives to true virtue its real luster and differentiates the saints from those who are not saints. Their glory, just like their false happiness, ends where the glory of the saints begins: I mean, at the grave. Death, which plunges into oblivion all the partisans of the world and makes them vanish from human minds, re-establishes the servants of God in true honor and makes the remembrance of them imperishable.

Death, which causes the world's partisans to be trampled underfoot and mingles their ashes with the common dust of the streets, withdraws the saints from ignominy and throws full light upon their forgotten virtues. Who is the great one of earth, be he prince or king, whom death does not turn into a frightful corpse, the presence of which is insupportable? The sight of it scares all; its deformity strikes terror; its decomposition drives all away. But when a saint lies dead, he draws people to him; everyone is eager to behold him, to have a relic of him. In his case, death loses all its horror.

That was what occurred after the death of De La Salle. His face seemed as beautiful and serene after he expired as it had been during his life. Everyone hastened to claim something belonging to him. The difficulty was to satisfy all those who asked for relics; a crucifix, a New Testament, an Imitation of Christ, and a rosary were all he had. They constituted his entire wealth. Once this inheritance had been seized by the most clever and most adroit hands, the others fell upon his poor garments. Everyone wanted some bit or piece for a relic. Outsiders did not scruple to appropriate, by a pious theft, whatever they could lay their hands on. Some even cut locks of his hair; others treasured things which he had used. Those of his disciples who were not able to get anything seemed as disconsolate as children who have lost their father's inheritance. To console them, copies were drawn up of the testament he had made shortly before his death; these were given to all the Brothers, present or absent.

To satisfy the devotion of his disciples and of the public, the body of the saintly priest, clad in sacerdotal vestments, was laid out for viewing in the chapel of Saint Yon from the evening of Good Friday until the afternoon of Holy Saturday. He was then buried, with no special ceremony, in the chapel of Sainte Suzanne in the parish church of Saint Sever in the presence of a large crowd of people who had come to the funeral. Several religious of different orders and various

clerics joined the parish clergy in honoring the memory of the deceased. His body was carried by six of the Brothers and followed by all the others, who bedewed with their tears the path they followed and who mingled their sobs with the chanting of the Psalms. Here is the epitaph inscribed on his tomb:

D. O. M.

HIC EXPECTAT RESURRECTIONEM VITAE VENERABILIS JOANNES BAP. DE LA SALLE RHEMUS, PRESBITER, DOCTOR THEOLOGUS, CANONICUS ECCLESIAE METROPOLITANAE RHEMENSIS, INSTITUTOR FRATRUM SCHOLAE CHRISTIANAE. OBIIT SEXTA PARASCEVES, ANNUM AGENS LXVIII, DIE SEPTIMA APRILIS ANNO 1719, IN AEDIBUS FRATRUM SANCTI YONIS HUJUSCE PAROCHIAE. DET ILLI DOMINUS INVENIRE REQUIEM IN ILLA DIE.

Because the feast of Easter and its octave made it impossible to hold the funeral Mass, it was celebrated with great solemnity on the Monday after Quasimodo Sunday by the clerics of the Minor Seminary of Saint Patrice, which is now at Saint Nicaise. Many pious persons hastened to pay to his memory the honors which he had so carefully avoided during his life, and God seemed to find their devotion agreeable, since he gave tangible tokens of his power, although we do not venture to declare them miraculous in anticipation of the judgment of the Church. Such is how, even on this earth, God rewards those who have been faithful to him unto death.

All who knew him regretted his departure and considered his death as a loss for the Church. The conviction about his heroic virtues, which he had left behind him wherever he had been or had dwelt for any length of time, brought him after his death a concert of praise from all over France. Worthy men could not refuse their tears, and his disciples were all but inconsolable.

The constant stream of letters which Brother Barthélemy received on this topic made it impossible for him to forget his loss and kept open the wound in his heart. His sorrow lasted as long as his life. Once deprived of De La Salle, he was as much at a loss as an orphan who, by the death of his parents, remains at the mercy of Providence without money, friends, or defenders. Life became a real trial for him, and as he himself declared, earth had no attraction for him, since he no longer saw his dear father in Jesus Christ.

To assuage his sorrow, the Superior set about collecting and causing to be collected accounts of all that the holy priest had done, while his memory was still fresh in everyone's mind, and to secure accounts of his life from those who had been eyewitnesses of it. He was

also much comforted by the goodwill shown by the Brothers, who, scattered as they were all over the country, took care out of precaution and for greater surety to have a large number of Masses said for the repose of the soul of their Founder, even though they felt sure he was in paradise. Many parish priests had solemn Masses sung, out of charity for the late Founder. No one showed more sympathy over the loss of De La Salle than the priests of the Seminary of Saint Nicholas du Chardonnet, who had been so edified the previous year by the examples of eminent virtue they had witnessed on his part. The reply that one of them sent to Brother Barthélemy on this subject deserves to be quoted here.

"My dear Brother, I was truly sorry to receive your letter concerning the death of your most honored beloved father, M. de La Salle, of which M. de La Vertu had already informed me. I have spread the news of this sad event, and I have recommended him to the prayers of our community while informing them of the details which you had given me in your letter. You may be sure that each of us joins you in praying for the beloved departed. All of us, and I in particular, consider him as a saint who is praying for us in heaven. I do not think that your Community can ever decline, having such a protector with the Lord. You know better than anyone else what a holy life he led, what opposition he had to face in founding the Institute, an obvious sign that it is God's work. I hope it will be strengthened by his prayers and by your correspondence with grace.

"We were fortunate enough to be edified by his presence during some six months while he did us the honor of residing among us. I think God had sent him to preach to our young men by his example and to help us to rise from our tepidity. His life here was most humble and mortified; he slept little and prayed much. Our bell-ringer told me several times that he always found him up when he went to ring the rising bell, even during the coldest winter weather, and during that time, he never went to the room where the fire was, except when I insisted on bringing him along with me, a thing which happened seldom, since my schedule did not correspond with his.

"He made at least three hours of meditation regularly every day. He was more faithful to the house regulations than the lowliest of seminarians, obeying with admirable promptness the first sound of the bell which announced the exercises. He was so submissive that he wearied the prefect by coming to ask him for permissions, even for those which are not required of the seminarians themselves: for instance, to speak with persons who came asking to see him, to bring them to his room, as you yourself noticed more than once, to go out

on free days, and even to write letters, for he never wrote a single one without an express permission. He was so willing to accede to the requests made to him to take part in funeral processions, without a stipend, or to conduct the funerals of children that it seemed as if that activity was something he valued very much. In a word, retirement, prayer, charity, humility, mortification, and a poor and hard life seemed to be what delighted him.

"As for myself and my hometown, we shall forever be indebted to him. When he lived in the Faubourg Saint Marcel, he was charitable enough to educate four young men to teach school. They left his institution so well trained and so full of zeal that if they had found in the local ecclesiastics someone capable of cultivating the good dispositions he had inspired them with, they might have established a most useful community for the province. One of them became a priest, and he teaches the humanities with edification for the young, in spite of the opposition they have frequently had to contend with from the magistrates and sometimes from parish priests and other ecclesiastics. I hope that this death will not deprive me of the affection of your Community and that you will always do me the honor of considering me as one of your friends. For my part, I shall strive always to give you proofs of my sincere friendship in the hope of sharing the merit of all your good works and your prayers before the Lord, in whose love I remain, very humbly yours, . . ."

This testimonial to De La Salle's virtue by such an able judge is not out of place here. It will, no doubt, bear fruit in the seminaries. The example of an ex-canon, priest, doctor, venerable Superior, and celebrated Founder being faithful to the first sound of the bell, asking for the least permissions, practicing childlike obedience, keeping recollection, avoiding the world, and engaging in practices of humility, charity, and mortification will teach young clerics that these virtues are proper to all ages. The period spent in the seminary is the time to learn how to acquire similar virtues, and De La Salle, in spite of his advanced years, exercised them with so much joy and ease in the Seminary of Saint Nicolas only because when he was young, he had acquired the habit of exercising them at Saint Sulpice.

Brother Barthélemy was not alone in being inconsolable over the loss of the holy Founder. Like him, many others could neither prevent themselves from weeping over it nor heal the wound that it had inflicted on their hearts. Time, of all remedies against affliction the most effective, could not soothe them, and they looked for an end to it only with the close of their lives. Thus Brother Barthélemy, who could not console himself, was obliged to comfort others and to dry their

tears when he could not prevent his own eyes from shedding them. Here is a touching letter he sent to one of the Brothers, trying to console him.

"My very dear Brother, may the grace and peace of Our Lord Jesus Christ be with us. You had every reason to shed tears when you learned of the death of our very dear father. I do not think that any of our Brothers was able to refrain from doing the same; it was something so natural. But after considering everything, my dear Brother, we must admit that it was the holy will of God. God had given our Founder to us for as long as he pleased; now he has taken him from us to reward him for his labors and for his saintly life. We must submit and conform ourselves to his divine good pleasure. The holy Apostles, too, were very sad when they were deprived of the sensible presence of their Divine Master, but to console them, he said, It is expedient for you that I go, for if I go not, the Holy Spirit will not come upon you. Our dear father is not lost; he is, in all probability, among the saints in heaven. He can do much for us before God's throne, since he obtained even on this earth so many graces for himself and for all the souls whom he helped to be converted and to give themselves to God.

"Now we admire his lofty virtues, his angelic purity, his deep interest in church ornaments and sacerdotal vestments, for which he spared no expense, his great liberality toward the poor, even though he himself was in need, and toward our Brothers as well, his zeal for the salvation of souls which made him at one time propose to exchange his canonry for a pastoral charge so as to be able to exercise his zeal; his humility, patience, obedience, complete resignation to Divine Providence, and so many other heroic virtues. I think he must take rank among the virgins, if I may judge by what I learned of his conduct with reference to chastity and virginity. No, my dear Brother, do not ask God to withdraw you from this world; I shall pray to him with all my heart to keep you here for as long as it may please him, for his glory, for the salvation of souls, and for your own greater good. I forbid you to die, except to your own self-will and way of thinking. Our dear father did not die without permission; I think he would have died much sooner if he had been able to get permission to do so. Hence, do not be sad any longer to no purpose, for the one whom you weep for as dead is living and enjoys peace which nobody can ever take from him. Be at peace, too; keep yourself in the close union he recommended to us and in the practice of the other virtues.

"Do not sadden the Spirit of Our Lord, which is within you, by an unjustified melancholy over our dear father. I do not know how I

myself manage; I am sad and joyful at the same time. The remembrance of his holy life and the recollection of several remarkable things which happened during his illness and at his death console me. So try to be more cheerful, for sadness which does not come from the movement of the Holy Spirit is dangerous and has unfortunate consequences."

It must be admitted that the sorrow felt by these good Brothers was amply justified. What loss in all the world could have affected them more than that of the father who had begotten them all in Jesus Christ, nourished them with the milk of his teaching, stimulated them by his example, upheld them by the power of his prayers, defended them by his patience and invincible courage from the persecutions of the world and of hell—and all this for nearly forty years? In losing him, they lost their teacher of the spiritual life, their guide in the paths of perfection, their legislator, Founder, and model. In losing him, they lost one of the greatest servants of God which the seventeenth century had seen in France, an apostolic man, a man of consummate virtue, a man according to God's own heart, a true image of Jesus Christ on earth. But, in truth, they have not lost him. He is in their regard in heaven what he was for them on earth. Shortly after his death, he wrought in their favor truly prodigious favors, and he continues to do so every day. I can, indeed, call prodigious the abrupt change which took place in the fortunes of the Brothers in France, where all of a sudden everything became favorable to them and where everything they could have desired and asked for was given to them, as we are about to see.

## Chapter XIX

*Unexpected blessings received by the Institute of the Brothers after De La Salle's death; at almost the same time, they obtain letters patent from King Louis XV and a Bull from Benedict XIII approving their rules and constituting their Society as a religious order.*[39]

The Brothers, disconsolate over the death of their holy Founder, continued to bewail his demise, and although time soothes the aching heart and dries up tears, it could not make them forget the vastness of their loss or allow them to cease fearing the results it might bring. They were not alone in weeping and in fearing. All who had known

the virtuous Founder, all those who felt true concern for the Christian Schools, and all the friends of the Brothers mingled their own tears with theirs, and all of them, alarmed over the perils threatening the Institute, feared that it might well be buried in De La Salle's tomb.

They might have been correct in their apprehension if the Institute had been the work of men, but as the sequel will show, the Holy Spirit was its true author and De La Salle only the instrument. Indeed, we shall see the Institute grow stronger, be firmly established, and after the demise of its father, assume its final form and perfection against all probability. Perfect union among the Brothers, an edifying subordination to the Directors of the various houses, cordial and unreserved submission to the Superior General, a sincere love for their state and vocation, an ardent zeal which each member of the Society showed for his own perfection, a reflowering of their early fervor, and a noble emulation for virtue were the happy dispositions which heaven desired to see and which it brought about in order to cause this great undertaking to proceed.

The Brothers vied with one another in trying to fill themselves with the spirit of their Founder, and each of them sought to make De La Salle live again in his own person. Though he had been taken from their sight, he remained ever present to them in spirit. They pondered the teachings he had given them in private, the instructions he had imparted to them in public, and the heroic examples of virtue which they had witnessed. The fear of not profiting by these, joined to the desire of imitating him, made them hasten in his footsteps with even greater ardor after his death than during his life.

It was a further cause of admiration for those who knew the Society intimately to see it not only maintain itself in the state in which the Founder had left it but even make progress and perfect itself without any human support and with no other resource than Divine Providence. They were surprised to see in this organization such an effective type of government, in the members such total dependence on the head, who was a simple Brother, and in everyone such great unanimity in pursuing the same ends.

They saw perfectly accomplished this truth which De La Salle had so constantly maintained and which had drawn down on him so many persecutions: namely, that the proper government of the Society required that one of its members should be at its head and that an outside Superior, no matter how virtuous he might be, would only

39. This is not accurate. The Institute was not approved as a religious "order" in the canonical sense, and only selected rules, some of them paraphrased, were incorporated into the Bull.

lead the Institute to ruin, because he would never truly possess its spirit and principles. Since his profession, mentality, and manners would be different than those of the Brothers, he would not possess the required resemblance between the Superior and the members. The Prince of Pastors, Jesus Christ, wished to be—sin excepted—like unto men, so that they might love and imitate him and so that he might guide them with more tenderness and gentleness.

The Brothers had only one heart and one soul. Among them there was no diversity of opinion. All wanted and thought only what the Superior wanted and thought, and the Superior himself had no other thought or will than that of the Brothers, because all of them, guided by the spirit of their Founder, which they seemed to have inherited on his death, were always unanimous in their views of what was best and in the choice of the means to procure it.

De La Salle still seemed to be alive in Brother Barthélemy, the joy of the Brothers, his inferiors. He had so well imbued himself with the spirit of his holy father that he spoke and acted like him in all things. Trained in his school and for so long his humble disciple before becoming his humble Superior, he never lost the disposition of a lowly disciple with regard to De La Salle. His own humility had constantly forced the humility of the Founder to give him advice on all matters, to share his insights with him, and to rule the Society through him.

Consequently, when Brother Barthélemy had governed the Institute for two years under the eyes and with the advice of De La Salle, it did not seem that there had been a change of Superior. It was, then, a new blow for the Institute when God took Brother Barthélemy fourteen months after the death of De La Salle. Then the tears, which had not yet ceased flowing, welled up again with abundance in the eyes of all the Brothers. They mourned the death of their father all over again in the death of this son who was so much like him, who had taken his place, and who represented him so well in their eyes.

Once again, the Society seemed in desperate straits. Consternation seized all hearts, and each member, seeing that God had for a second time taken away their leader, feared for the Institute. Even the least timid and the least humble wondered whether God might be punishing them in his anger and abandoning an Institute whose holiness they thought they had sullied by their infidelity and tepidity. Others thought that they were the causes of God's malediction and that they were obliging divine justice to avenge their own particular faults on the entire Community. These humble sentiments redoubled the fervor of the Brothers and disposed them to receive the favors which heaven destined for them.

God entertained sentiments of goodness and mercy in their regard. If he took away those who seemed to be the pillars of the Institute, it was only to convince them that he would be able to preserve it without their help and that since it was his work, he did not need any man to complete it. They all realized this, from the highest member to the lowliest novice. Filled with courage, great confidence in God, and renewed attachment to their vocation, they conceived an extraordinary desire to persevere in it to death and thus to contribute by an augmentation of their fervor to the perfecting of the task that De La Salle had so generously begun and carried through.

## The election of Brother Timothée

Brother Barthélemy's two Assistants, seeing themselves charged with the guidance of the little bark so long agitated by so many furious storms, took the tiller in hand with great courage and guided it like skillful pilots amidst these new dangers. Their concern was to keep everything in good order and to give to the deceased Superior a successor who would equal him in merit. Without losing time, they sent to all the houses of the Institute a circular letter which informed the Brothers in a most touching manner of the death of their Superior and indicated to the Directors the date of the assembly which would choose his successor. The spirit of union, subordination, and dependence which De La Salle and his successor had left among the Brothers at their deaths maintained them all in due order without letting the grief which overwhelmed them alter their peace of mind. They all welcomed the letter with great respect, and the Brothers Directors of the various houses, all eighteen of them, punctually carried out the orders given them.

A canon,[40] a friend of the Institute who enjoyed Brother Barthélemy's confidence and whom the Brother had chosen for his last confession when he realized he was in danger of death, had taken care to ask him which of the Brothers he considered the best qualified to replace him. The dying Superior had indicated Brother Timothée, at that time Director of the house in Avignon. He added that Brother Timothée was the one who, also in De La Salle's opinion, deserved to be chosen and that the saintly Founder might have picked him to take his own place, even during his life, if the Brother had been a little longer in the Society. In fact, he was at this time only a neophyte in the Community, so to speak, but his prudence, his even temper, his

39. Jean-Baptiste Blain, the biographer.

good spirit, and his kind, gracious, and courteous ways had drawn the Founder's eyes on him and merited his being chosen to succeed him some day.[41]

Such was the testimony that this canon gave in his favor, relating the statement of the late Brother Barthélemy to some of the principal Brothers who had come for the election. They did not need to be persuaded on this point, for because of either a divine inspiration or a predisposition in favor of Brother Timothée, they were nearly unanimous in choosing him. All of them were delighted to give their vote to a Brother whom their saintly father himself had singled out and to find their own judgment on this point in conformity with his.

The election took place on the feast of the Assumption, 1720. It found only one discontented person in the assembly, namely, the newly elected Superior. The satisfaction felt by all the others was equaled by the disappointment on the part of the new Superior. The Brothers had the double joy of seeing in the first position the one whom De La Salle had hoped would occupy it and of finding themselves in no danger of being called to it themselves, for each of them feared this responsibility as much as he wished to see it entrusted to Brother Timothée. Thus, while he was in consternation over his election, the others were comforted and reassured, like men who reach port after avoiding a dangerous shoal.

Such was the attitude that all the Brothers had inherited from their beloved father with regard to occupying the primary place. His example had inspired them with a real horror for it. The Brothers recalled all the efforts he had made during thirty years to escape from it, the pains and unbelievable persecutions he had to endure while occupying it, the repose and joy he had enjoyed when he had finally descended to the last place, the constant attraction he had for a private and retired life, hidden and unknown to the world. So well had they absorbed his spirit that they felt themselves irreconcilably opposed to being the Superior. All of them, delighted that they had avoided this position, congratulated themselves on having conferred it on the one who seemed the most capable of occupying it and whom heaven itself appeared to have indicated by the almost unanimous vote which had taken place, as well as by De La Salle's own choice.

Their holy joy was troubled only by the tears and sighs of the new Superior. Considering his election at first as a sort of bad dream,

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41. In 1717, Brother Timothée was thirty-five years old and had been in the Institute since 1700. He was only four years younger than Brother Barthélemy.

he could not believe that they really wanted to place at the head of the other Brothers the youngest man in the assembly, the one who, he felt, deserved it least. He wished to think and to make others think that by error they had mistaken his name for someone else's and that it was simply impossible that the choice should have fallen on him. But finally, when the voting slips made it clear that he was indeed elected and his eyes demonstrated to him that his ears had heard aright, he changed from astonishment to desolation and acted like a man who has just heard the sentence condemning him to execution. They were obliged to let him bewail his pretended misfortune and to listen to the complaints he made to the Brothers about their poor choice, as well as to the pleas he presented asking them to revoke their decision.

After these first moments of sorrow, when reason seemed to be drowned in tears, the Brothers did what they could to console Brother Timothée and promised him that they would make his task an easy one by perfect submission to his orders and an exact fidelity to their duties. Such edifying dispositions, far from diminishing Brother Timothée's sadness, only added thereto, because they showed him that such inferiors should be at the head of the Institute and he himself at their feet. Each of them, he protested, possessed the merit that the first place required, while he, the only one unworthy of it, could only draw down God's wrath on the Society, put it to shame, and find his own ruin in his elevation.

The Brothers, delighted to discover such edifying sentiments in their new Superior, hoped for all good things from a man who thought of himself what he should have thought, what the Spirit of God teaches men to think, and what true humility makes apparent. They had made no mistake in their choice, for it was under the government of Brother Timothée and thanks to his wise action that the most important undertakings for the good of the Brothers came to fruition beyond their most sanguine hopes, as we shall see.

## The title to the property of Saint Yon

The first task was to make sure of their ownership of the property of Saint Yon. This was as difficult as it was important. The Brothers were in great danger of losing title to the estate and seeing it taken over by strangers, even though it had been bought with their money and De La Salle's. The purchase had been made in the name of two Brothers, the first of whom, Brother Barthélemy, had just died, and the second Brother was infirm and advanced in age. The possibility of his death

threatened to dispossess the Brothers.[42] If Divine Providence, which kept watch over God's work, had not preserved this Brother in life when he was so necessary, the domain of Saint Yon would have reverted to another owner, and thus the Brothers would have been reduced once again to their former unsatisfactory situation which had lasted so long and which had caused them so much trouble. They would have found themselves without a roof over their heads, obliged to wander from one place to another, lacking any stable habitation where they could establish themselves in peace and set up their novitiate. They would have been turned out of a house which belonged to them; they would have been in greater difficulty than ever to find another domicile. Where could they have discovered a place like Saint Yon: vast, spacious, healthful, enjoying good air, solitary, and favorable to recollection, yet situated at the gates of one of the richest and most important cities in the kingdom?

## The application for letters patent

It was a matter of supreme importance for the Institute to assure its ownership of the property. But that was as difficult to accomplish as it was important, for it required letters patent. The Brothers, lacking means and influence, hardly dared to plan on setting in motion the machinery for securing the letters. On the one hand, the difficulty of the enterprise disheartened them; on the other, necessity spurred them on to try and to hope that God would grant them success.

That was the project which the new Superior and his council resolved to undertake. They therefore drew up a memorandum which M. de Pontcarré, first president of the parliament of Normandy and the great protector of the Institute, approved and promised to support with all his influence. That pious and illustrious magistrate, a friend of all God's works, did indeed take the first steps. He wrote to M. de Bezons, then archbishop of Rouen, asking him to countersign the Brothers' request and to grant them his protection. Once his cooperation was obtained and now with the backing of the first president and of the highest religious authority in the province, the Brothers took the liberty of presenting their petition to the royal chancellor, who, before proceeding further, wished to know whether the city was in favor of the move. He wrote to the intendant of Rouen, asking him to confer on this matter with the mayor and the city council.

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42. This was Brother Thomas, fifty years old and not exactly an aged invalid. He still had another twenty years to live.

The project would soon have been brought to a successful conclusion had other and more important obstacles not arisen. At the request of the first president, the city government willingly gave its consent without delay and in due form. The statement by the city authorities and the other necessary documents were forwarded to the minister of justice, who promised to speak of it to the regent. The process seemed well on its way, but, as usual, God's projects move slowly and never fail to meet with impediments. This one was halted at the very door of the royal council by the man who could have done the most to make it succeed.

In fact, the Brothers found a redoubtable adversary in the chancellor's secretary, who was also the first president of the fiscal chamber. He knew all the legal tactics apt to cause their petition to be rejected, and, in fact, he caused it to fail by a very specious, cleverly thought-out, and legal maneuver. The pretext on which he based his opposition to the Brothers' request for letters patent was that these were not needed for the schools. He defended this opinion very skillfully in the presence of the chancellor and of the two Brothers who had been sent to plead their case. His argument seemed valid and did not admit of any reply. Since the Christian Schools are authorized and recommended by various declarations of the king, even some very recent ones, what need is there, he asked, for letters patent to confirm the right of the Brothers to conduct them?

Of course, they did not need the letters to teach in the Gratuitous Schools; the permission of the bishops was quite sufficient for that. But they needed the letters to insure their ownership of their property at Saint Yon, to give public recognition to their status, and to establish them as a regularly constituted Community capable of acquiring and possessing property in the kingdom. M. d'Aguesseau[43] did not seem convinced by his secretary's arguments. He answered very kindly, telling the Brothers that he would take the matter under consideration. He did speak of it to the regent, but the latter, apparently won over by the secretary who had come out in opposition to the Brothers, rejected their request.

Thus the attempt failed in 1721. It was taken up again with more likelihood of success when M. d'Armenonville was made keeper of the seals after the disgrace of the chancellor. The change put a whole new face on the matter, and the Brothers did all they could to profit by it. Circumstances could not have been more favorable, because the

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43. The royal chancellor, or minister of justice, who may have been a Jansenist sympathizer.

new minister was known for his great zeal for sound doctrine and for his depth of religion and piety, which made him a friend of all good works. The Brothers managed to approach him, thanks to the recommendation of Abbé de Saint Aubin, Superior General of the Seminaries of Saint Sulpice. He promised them his help and protection. The former chancellor's secretary, who had also lost his post, was no longer in a position to block the Brothers in pursuing their plan, but he did manage to retard it by constantly refusing to send back the papers which had been left in his hands and which he never returned.

It was necessary, therefore, to begin all over again, which occasioned new expenses, and to solicit for a second time the protection of Archbishop de Bezons and of De Pontcarré and to get a second statement of consent from the city authorities. When all that was done, certain highly considered persons outstanding for their piety approached those who had the honor of belonging to the king's privy council. All those men were in favor of an Institute so useful to the public and so necessary to poverty-stricken youth. They promised their protection and their votes. The Marquis de La Vrillière, among others, showed himself very active in promoting the affair.

Even so, their goodwill remained ineffective for the time being because the regent, surprised at seeing the members of his council pleading with him unanimously to grant letters patent to the Brothers, was somewhat embarrassed at first. On the one hand, he was reluctant to refuse the favor flatly, but on the other, he did not want to give in to their petition. The expedient he came up with, in order not to grant anything while not refusing anything, was to temporize by saying that it was necessary to wait a while longer. Thus he cleverly evaded the request and stymied the project once more.

A year later, a third effort was made, which the regent again caused to fail while appearing not to refuse. Once more, his entire council, along with the prime minister, Cardinal Dubois, at its head, was ready to grant the Brothers what they were asking for. Other friends, as distinguished by their high birth as by their piety, joined the first group in pleading the cause of the Institute. The worthiness of their petition was obvious enough, and all agreed that the prince ought to give his protection to an Institute devoted to the task of conducting Christian and Gratuitous Schools which had been so strongly authorized and recommended by royal edicts.

The see of Rouen was vacant at the moment, Archbishop de Bezons having died recently, and this gave His Royal Highness a specious pretext for setting aside the petition backed by his whole council. De La Vrillière, irritated at this new delaying tactic, objected

that the late archbishop had given his consent, but M. Le Duc d'Orléans[44] replied that the agreement of the archbishop's successor was also needed; therefore, they must wait. Unfortunately, the new archbishop had not yet been appointed and was not named for a considerable time, and everything had to remain in suspense for two more years. The new setback did not discourage the Brothers. Hoping against hope, they multiplied their prayers and did all they could to interest the Most Blessed Virgin on their behalf. Convinced that success would be theirs if she intervened in their favor, they made a vow to fast in perpetuity on the eve of the Immaculate Conception and to consecrate themselves solemnly to her on the feast itself if she secured the letters patent for them.

Before the regent died, toward the end of 1723, he had named M. de Tressan, bishop of Nantes, to be archbishop of Rouen. This prelate was a member of the regent's council and had frequently befriended the Brothers since they had started their efforts to obtain the letters. He gave them new assurances of his benevolence and promised that as soon as he entered into possession of his archdiocese, he would take their project in hand and bring it to success. However, nobody knew how long that would take, and his gracious words did not guarantee that the sick and infirm Brother who had lent his name for the purchase of Saint Yon would stay alive. If he died, the house would be lost, and the Institute would once more become what it had been previously: unsettled and uprooted, its members unsure of what would become of them.

As it was extremely important for the letters patent to be granted before the Brother in question died, the Brothers decided to send him to plead for them in person. He was an excellent choice. Tall, well-built, with a venerable air which won respect, he looked like one of the ancient patriarchs, although his pallor and emaciation caused him to resemble one of the desert abbots of old. His candor and simplicity won the favor of those whom he approached. So it was decided to send him in person to promote the affair, in the hope that the sight of him might touch the responsible people and hasten the conclusion of the business.

Although he was not feeling well, the Brother left for Fontainebleau, where the court was, and he did all that could be expected of him. His pale and drawn countenance, which seemed to warn those he spoke to that his death could not be far off, pleaded more eloquently on his behalf than his words and gave visible testimony that

44. The regent.

it was urgent to guarantee the possession of Saint Yon to the Institute and to afford the Brother personally this final assurance by the letters patent or else consent to the loss of the property and the death of the Brother.

M. de La Vergne de Tressan, the archbishop-designate of Rouen, found himself urged by so many highly placed persons, all distinguished by their piety, to present the request of the Brothers to the council that he finally resolved to do so, even though he had not yet been installed. In doing this, he was only following his natural inclination toward kindliness, his willingness to oblige everybody. He was even more strongly moved to act by the condition in which he found the Brother, whose death would have had such disastrous consequences for an Institute which was precious to the Church, one established at the gates of his archiepiscopal city.

When the petition was presented and read to the council, it won the approbation of the members with no dissenting voice. The king, who by this time was of age, was surprised at this unanimity and looked inquiringly at Cardinal de Fleury,[45] who held the Institute in high esteem and was more in favor of the project than anybody else. The prime minister gave His Majesty to understand that this good work was indeed worthy of his protection and deserved the favor requested. Immediately the prince, who had inherited his father's piety and his great-grandfather's zeal for religion, graciously authorized the granting of letters patent to the house of Saint Yon and directed that mention be made in the state register that the letters were to be delivered once De Tressan had been enthroned as archbishop.

Thus, after four years of negotiations and unsuccessful attempts, the house at Saint Yon definitely became the property of the Brothers. Their status, up to then uncertain and unsettled, was consolidated by the letters patent issued on 28 September 1724, eve of the feast of Saint Michel. Some three months later, the documents were forwarded, thanks to the archbishop, who by that time had returned to Paris after taking possession of the see of Rouen early in 1725. The Brothers are not the only religious group to whom Archbishop de Tressan rendered such an important and necessary service. His interest in the Christian Schools led him to request the same favor for the Daughters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, called Sisters of Ernemont.[46] They are devoted to the care of the sick in country places and to the gratuitous

45. He served as prime minister during the early years of Louis XV's reign.

46. Blain was ecclesiastical superior of that congregation.

instruction of youth in the city and diocese of Rouen. Louis XV granted this favor with equal graciousness.

A retirement home in Rouen for old and infirm priests received the same favor, thanks to this prelate. If he did not do as much for the Seminary of Saint Nicaise, which had applied for letters patent through former Archbishop d'Aubigné, he made sure that this institution so necessary for the education of young candidates for the priesthood received 2,000 écus annually from funds of the diocesan clergy, money which had been granted by Louis XIV at the request of Archbishop d'Aubigné. In addition, he added to the seminary itself, and presently he is having additional buildings constructed to lodge a larger number of candidates. Thus, thanks to his zeal and his efforts, Archbishop de Tressan procured for the state four kinds of establishments which are among the most necessary for the Church and for the public.

The letters patent of the Brothers were registered by the parliament of Rouen on 2 March 1725 and by the fiscal office four months later. But this last formality was concluded only with great difficulty and much opposition caused by the parish priest of . . . .[47] The pastor was concerned about the loss he might suffer if the arid and sandy area where Saint Yon is situated was withdrawn from the territory on which his revenue was based. On that occasion, he used all his influence to prevent the letters patent from being registered in court. He was too prudent to try the same tactics with the parliament, because he would have had to contend with a redoubtable adversary in the person of the first president, De Pontcarré, the outspoken protector of the Brothers, who was at the same time the magistrate in charge of furthering the acceptance of the letters patent.

So the priest very cleverly waited, before trying to oppose the registration of the letters, until they were before the second court, and he did so with consummate skill. He visited all the members of the council and was eloquent enough to make them believe some of the things he stated. Actually, the letters were contrary to the interests of a man who, convinced that the Brother who was the legal owner could not live much longer, flattered himself that the house of Saint Yon would revert in a short while to its former owner and that he himself would be able to maintain his jurisdiction over a section of his parish so rich in sand and gravel.

Monsieur . . . , hearing about the intrigues of this opponent of the letters patent, was kind enough to pay a visit to Monsieur de La

47. Blain omits the name here; no doubt he is referring to the pastor of Saint Sever, where Saint Yon was located.

Rivière-Lesdo, first president of the bureau of finance, to ask him to use his influence in favor of the Brothers. His action was needed, for almost all the members of this office had allowed themselves to be strongly prejudiced by the Brothers' adversary. He had intrigued so assiduously that one of the main magistrates had promised him to cause the affair to fall through by refusing his consent, which was necessary. But the powerful friend of the Brothers, possessing a superior mind and equal authority, acted so adroitly in their support in this complicated matter that they began to hope that things would take a turn for the better.

It was not possible, however, after the reading of the letters patent on 2 July 1725, to prevent the procurator, coached by the Brothers' enemy, from advancing all the calumnies suggested to him against the Brothers and from falsely imputing to them all sorts of misdeeds quite apt to prejudice the second court against them. His discourse achieved part of its intended effect on judges who were already not too open-minded, for although it did not prevent them from registering the letters, it suggested adding to them some extremely burdensome conditions, very harsh and mortifying for the Brothers, in spite of the eloquent address made in their favor by M. de Captot, the advocate general. The conditions were, however, soon declared null by a decree of the king's council, thanks to the appeal made by the pious and influential protector of the Brothers. In this way, in spite of the surprising intrigues of one man, the letters patent were registered in the two highest courts of Normandy. The Institute, which had become a religious order through the Bull of Approbataion of the Holy See, which the king's council had accepted as valid, was finally liberated from the dependence and the sort of slavery in which its adversaries had sought to confine it through those special clauses, contrary to the common law and to the privileges of all religious communities.

## The papal Bull of Approbation of the Institute

We must now speak of the approbation which the Holy See gave to the Institute of the Brothers. While the Brothers were petitioning the French court for letters patent, they were also at work at the court of Rome, seeking to obtain a Bull of Approbation. About the same amount of time was spent in both these endeavors, and their successful termination occurred almost simultaneously.

To set the second of these negotiations in motion, Divine Providence made use of a Brother of the Society who previously had been in the employ of M. de Soubise, the father of Cardinal de Rohan. This

Brother[48] had been admitted into the Community by De La Salle around 1707. He loved his vocation, was zealous, presented himself well, spoke agreeably, and was beloved and highly regarded by the illustrious family by which he had once been employed. That was what inspired Brother Barthélemy, shortly after De La Salle's death, with the idea of taking advantage, for the benefit of the Community, of the esteem that the Soubise family had for their former employee. The two of them, therefore, went to pay their respects to His Eminence, hoping to win his protection but without having any definite idea in mind as to how he could help them.

Cardinal de Rohan was happy to see his father's old friend, now dressed in the Brothers' habit. He received them very kindly and, while telling the Brother how pleased he was over his decision to become a religious, inquired if he could be of help to him. The Brother, who was only waiting for such an opportunity, did not fail to seize it, and he begged His Eminence to take the Community under his protection and to give the struggling and persecuted Institute the support it needed. The cardinal willingly promised to do so.

After Brother Barthélemy's death, the same Brother offered to go with Brother Timothée, introduce him to His Eminence, and solicit his patronage again. They went together, paid him their respects, and enjoyed a long and cordial audience with him during which the prelate again promised his help and protection. At that time, the project of securing a Bull of Approbation had not yet been launched. In fact, the idea of doing so did not come up until some six months later, in 1721, when the news became public that Cardinal de Rohan had been named ambassador extraordinary of France to the court of Rome and was soon to depart. Who could better serve the interests of the Brothers in the capital of Christendom than so mighty a prelate? He had promised to protect them, and his heart did not belie his lips. By character, by his love for all good works, and by his special regard for an aged and faithful employee of his father, he was entirely willing to help the Brothers. It was a fine opportunity to solicit the goodwill of the Holy See through his influence and authority.

All these ideas, a bit confused at first, began to take shape in the mind of the Brother Superior. As they sorted themselves out, they left him with the desire of having Rome approve the Society founded by De La Salle and the rules he had composed. Brother Timothée informed the old Brother of his plan, and the latter agreed to help. So he and a companion given to him by the Superior were sent to bring

48. Brother Honoré.

to the cardinal a memorandum drawn up in the form of a *placet*. In the document, His Eminence was asked to use his influence at Rome to have the rules and the Institute of the Brothers approved. However, they could not speak to the cardinal himself, who was on the point of leaving, so they addressed themselves, very fortunately, to Abbé Vivant, who was going to Rome as part of Cardinal de Rohan's entourage.[49]

The matter could not have been put into better hands, nor could it have found another patron more qualified to bring it to success. Vivant had already been to Rome several times, had lived there for long periods, and knew how things were done there. He was, moreover, a man who favored all good works, who took pleasure in helping others. As this task of the Brothers was especially to his liking and he could see the great good it was capable of accomplishing for the Church, he took the Brothers' interests to heart and promised to promote them with diligence. This he did with a zeal and skill which deserve for him eternal gratitude on the part of the Brothers.

It would seem that the Brother of whom we have spoken lived only to do that service to his Community. Not long after he had presented this *placet* to the cardinal, he died, in August 1721, at the age of sixty. He had lived in the Society for some fifteen years as a serving Brother.

Cardinal de Rohan's sojourn in Rome was a brief one. On his arrival, he found that Clement XI had just died, and after taking part in the conclave that elected Innocent XIII, he returned to France. The journey, however, was not without advantage for the Brothers, for Abbé Vivant took care to place their Rule into the hands of some of his Roman friends along with a recommendation from His Eminence that they take steps to secure approval by the Holy See. On his return to Paris, he commissioned one of his friends, a banker at the Roman court, to negotiate the matter.

One difficulty seemed to stand in the way, and it took time to resolve it. Abbé de Tencin, today archbishop of Embrun, was at that time in charge of expediting day-to-day affairs concerning French interests in Rome. He ordered the people who were trying to obtain a Bull of Approbation for the Brothers to suspend their attempts until the king had granted the letters patent or until he himself had received from His Majesty a statement in their favor. Thus both the Bull

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49. Jean Vivant was the brother of François Vivant, vicar-general of Paris, who had won the cardinal's support in maintaining the Brothers' rules without the changes advocated by the Sulpicians.

and the letters patent, which were being sought at the same time, remained in suspense. Almost four years went by without any progress, but finally the hour chosen by Divine Providence for settling this business came, and the Bull was issued shortly after the letters patent, as we have related above.

Innocent XIII died not long after his election. Cardinal de Rohan returned to Rome for the conclave, and Abbé Vivant again accompanied him. During his stay in the Eternal City, he arranged everything for the granting of the Bull, as he had promised the Brothers before his departure. Thus, on returning to Paris after the election of Benedict XIII and finding that the letters patent had been issued, he immediately advised his friends in Rome of this fact and urged them to pursue with the greatest diligence the approval of the rules of the Brothers and their Institute. He was obeyed with zeal and success, and the Bull was issued toward the end of January 1725, after the ceremony of the opening of the holy door for the jubilee year.

I must not omit here some circumstances which show the attention that God manifested in favoring after De La Salle's death all the pious desires of his servant which during his life he seemed to take pleasure in denying. De La Salle had always hoped for three things for the well-being and perfection of his Institute: that it would become a religious order, that the Rule would be approved in its integrity without addition or diminution, and that the Institute would not be merged with some already-approved older order.

His hopes were carried out to the letter without any special effort on the Brothers' part and even without their having thought of doing so. A year before the granting of the Bull, they had been advised by their Roman correspondents that the Holy See would refuse to approve their rules unless they were willing to take the three vows of religion. Their Rule spoke only of the vow of obedience, but all of them knew in their hearts what their father had in his, that is, the pious desire to add to the vow of obedience those of poverty and chastity. Several Brothers had already made such vows in private. Thus delighted over the opportunity that Divine Providence afforded them, they hastened to accept this glorious yoke which was being offered to them and joyfully presented their hands to the agreeable chains which had been prepared for them. This holy disposition brought the Brothers to the complete fulfillment of their desires. Their Rule was approved as De La Salle had left it, without additions, restrictions, or changes and without being joined to any other Rule. This last point was important, and the saintly Founder had greatly feared that approval might not be granted. In fact, he had good reason to be

apprehensive on this point, for his Rule could not have been combined with any other of a different nature. Any change, consequently, would have modified its form instead of fortifying it, and it would have ended by destroying it.

The Bull of Approbation of the Institute and of the rules of the Brothers of the Christian Schools was presented to the royal council and accepted by that body in spite of the opposition of some of the officials of the court. The royal letters were sent off, sealed, and finally registered by the parliament of Rouen on 12 May 1725.

To all the Brothers of the Institute—who had not been kept informed of the negotiations we have been describing—this good news seemed a heavenly boon. All the business had been carried on in such secrecy, inside as well as outside the Community, that except for the four or five main members of the Society who were in the know and who were the principal agents, nobody had the slightest suspicion of what was going on. The first president, De Pontcarré, was himself not aware of the request for the Bull of Approbation. So surprised was he over the complete success it had met with that he remarked in his initial moment of astonishment *that the Brothers have gone a long way in a short time.*

It can be said that the Brothers' ship, for forty years the plaything of storms and winds because of the persecutions of the world, which is always an enemy of God's works, and launched on such a lengthy voyage, where it had been a thousand times in danger of shipwreck, had finally reached the desired port. What was the surprise, the joy, of the poor Brothers, up to then so maltreated by the world? It is easier to imagine than to describe. At last they were in a more assured condition. They learned that their status had changed into a more perfect and certain one, like men who, on awaking from sleep, find a treasure, recover their liberty, or inherit a fortune. They saw themselves at last what they had desired to be without hope of ever becoming such. The great advantages that the papal Bull brought them for the perfection of their Institute in general and for their own individual perfection were motives for a renewal of fervor among them; each one thought of nothing thenceforth save of profiting by the great grace offered him and of preparing himself to become a perfect religious.

Finally, Divine Providence, as if wishing to show by an evident sign that the Bull and the letters patent were God's own doing, provided for the expenses they had occasioned. On this account, Providence became more liberal than ever toward the sons who from the beginning had been entrusted to its care and whom it had always provided for and protected, even when they had been abandoned

and rejected by creatures. God procured for them by natural and apparently ordinary means all the financial help they needed. This came about through the large number of boarders that applied for admission to Saint Yon. To let it be known that it was God's doing, there has never been such an influx, before or since, of students capable of adding to the resources of the house by such a large sum of fees.

On 6 August of that same year, 1725, the general assembly of the principal Brothers, both Directors and older Brothers, was convoked to accept the Bull of Benedict XIII in the presence of the Most Blessed Sacrament. The Bull was received as the Ark of the Covenant had been in Jerusalem of yore by David and the principal men of Israel, namely, with transports of joy, gratitude, praise, and devotion which seemed to make this a day of eternal blessedness for these good Brothers.

The days which followed, up to the Assumption of the Most Blessed Virgin, were spent in retreat, silence, close union with God, profound recollection, and renewed fervor. This retreat served as a preparation for making the three vows of religion. Brother Superior had wished to give up his position on that occasion, but his humility found so much opposition in the General Chapter on the part of all the members that he was obliged to remain in office in spite of his pleading and urging. Morning and evening, Père Baudin, the Director of the Jesuit novitiate in Rouen, came to address the assembly. He was a man of rare merit and uncommon virtue. Père Malesco of the same Society and the Directors of the major seminary also spoke on the special grace that heaven was giving the Institute, on the excellence of its status, and on the importance of being faithful thereto. All these talks helped to enkindle the fire of the Holy Spirit in the house of Saint Yon during these days of retreat. The retreat ended by the pronouncing of the three vows of religion, made by each Brother in turn before the Blessed Sacrament exposed. The profession was made on the feast of Our Lady's Assumption. Abbé Robinet, canon of the cathedral and vicar-general of the diocese of Rouen, representing and holding the place of the Holy Father, celebrated Mass and addressed an eloquent and touching exhortation to those present.

In that General Chapter, the members, after voting to have the Rule printed in order to make sure that it was not altered or changed with the passing of time and the introduction of possible relaxation, also adopted several disciplinary provisions to maintain regular observance in full vigor. One of these points concerned the use of tobacco, the introduction of which it was desired to prevent by specifically forbidding it. It was decided that all postulants would be

informed of the rule forbidding tobacco and that the doors of the house would be opened only to those who were willing to give up this practice for the rest of their lives.

Since that time, the blessings of the Lord have been multiplied on the house of Saint Yon, as De La Salle had foretold. On the eve of his death, he had said, *This house will flourish.* Indeed, he would no longer recognize it if he returned to life. Since his death, it has been enlarged by more than half. Every day, to the great astonishment of the public at large and even of the Brothers themselves, we can see large stone buildings going up which seem to be founded on Providence alone. One large wing joined to the original structure runs from west to east. It was built at the cost of some 25,000 livres. This addition was begun thanks to a gift of 2,000 livres donated by the father of a retarded child who entrusted the youngster to the Brothers for the rest of his life. God so generously provided the remainder of the money needed that the Brothers themselves would be at a loss to account for it.

The building of the chapel, which is nearing completion, was also undertaken without reserve funds or resources other than the generosity of our heavenly Father. Here is what suggested this project. In one of the houses of the Society, the salaries of the Brothers of 300 livres per year had not been paid for nine years. They had begun to despair of ever collecting this money, so they made a vow to devote this amount, if they ever did receive it, to the building of a chapel at Saint Yon. Shortly after the vow was made, the back salaries were paid. The amount was not sufficient to cover the expense of laying the foundation of the proposed chapel. The Brothers, however, used the funds to start the project, in the hope that the divine hand which had begun it would not leave it unfinished. Since that time, the building has gone ahead day by day, although the Brothers had no special benefactor to rely on, no special funds to draw from. It is true that they build very economically and at the expense of their own leisure time. They received at no cost the foundation stones from the fine house of the late President Carel, which was torn down just a short distance from their gate. They can get all the sand they need on the property itself.

The architect and a good many of the workers come from among the Brothers in the house. The Brothers do most of the work themselves. They extract the sand, transport the materials, shape the stones, and do virtually everything else. They live mostly on the produce of their garden, a dry and not very fertile spot situated in a sandy bottom which they water with their sweat and force by their

hard and assiduous labor to reward its owners. Moreover, they drink only weak beer and eat only coarse bread. In this way, they economize enough on food to be able to build, and their own work represents over half of the building costs. The rest comes from the funds of Divine Providence, causing their task to progress little by little. Up to now, the charity of the public whom they serve in Rouen with such unexampled disinterestedness and generosity has not helped them in any way.

## End of Book Three

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This index includes the names of persons, places, and documents in the three books of *The Life of John Baptist de La Salle, Founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools*, except the name of John Baptist de La Salle. The table of contents of each book and the individual chapter headings will help the reader locate the events and themes in his life. See Cahiers lasalliens 9 (Rome, 1974) for a complete index of general and specific names of places and of persons in the three early biographies of De La Salle by Bernard, Blain, and Maillefer.

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