

37. FORMATION

Summary:

1. De La Salle's intention: to form¹ children. – 2. A journey with many stages: forming a new society. 2.1. At first forming schoolteachers in Reims: 2.1.1. bringing them into his own home, 2.1.2. with a consequent change in the teachers. 2.2. They formed a new community. 2.2.1. Influenced by Père Barré, 2.3. De La Salle accepted his call to be a Formator, 2.4. and was led to form a small congregation, 2.4.1. notably in the assembly of 1686. 2.5. At the end of his life he admitted that he had begun to form the Brothers: 2.5.1. by forming a novitiate, 2.5.2. a preparatory novitiate; 2.5.3. in 1691 he decided to form a novitiate to form candidates. – 3. A broader area of concern: forming schoolteachers: 3.1. by providing a professional formation, 3.1.1. and genuine competence. 3.2. It was the kind of formation that many at that time were looking for but that was not generally available. 3.2.1. Consider, for example the program of De Chennevières, 3.2.2. the work and the programs of Demia, 3.2.3. to understand better the attempts of De La Salle to open "seminaries" for training teachers. – 4. The theological meaning of these activities: formation in the light of the doctrine of creation and incarnation. 4.1. directed towards interiority: forming acts of faith; 4.2. in a creature formed in the image of God; 4.3. such as would serve to form the man-God; 4.4. in order to form the Church.

Except for those occasions when he temporarily replaced a missing Brother — in Reims at Saint-Jacques (B1 244 B), in Paris at Saint-Sulpice (Ibid. 288 A, 302 C), or in Grenoble at Saint-Laurent (B2 101 B) — De La Salle was not di-

rectly involved in **forming** the children of the artisans and the poor.

That is the reason, however, why he became progressively involved with a group of schoolteachers and was able to contribute to their **formation**. In the same way he was led to **form** the brothers, to form a novitiate, and to **form** a new Society in the Church.

He thus brought into being and gave stability to an enterprise that many of the leaders of the educational and catechetical movements in seventeenth-century France had barely begun or only envisioned.

In the writings of De La Salle the verb *former* is not limited to these institutional images. The abstract noun *formation* is used only once (CE 65 B), and that in reference to forming the letter of the alphabet. For that reason, if we want to penetrate the idea the Founder had of **formation**, we must

¹ Translator's note. It is not always possible to translate the French verb *former* directly into idiomatic English in expressions such as "to form children" or "to form a novitiate." Furthermore, English has no single word to translate *formateur*, the one who forms. Since, however, words related to formation, including even "formator" have become customary in Institute usage, and since the original French of this article analyzes the implications of the verb *former* in De La Salle's writings, it seems best to transliterate the original rather than to provide an idiomatic English translation.

Similarly, the word "seminary" in English is used almost exclusively for institutions for the training of candidates for the priesthood. The French sources, however, refer to the training schools for rural teachers, as well as the junior novitiate in Reims as *séminaires*. It seems best for the purposes of translation and context to use the corresponding English word, but in quotes to indicate this variant English usage.

examine the various ways he uses the verb *former* in the light of his experience and decisions, as well as those of his predecessors.

1. FORMING CHILDREN

Four passages in the Founder's meditations speak of "forming children" and three others use equivalent terms, i.e., "to form your disciples" (MF 100.2), or "those whom you ought to instruct" (MD 37.1).

Concerning the origin of this "assignment", this "obligation", this "duty", De La Salle writes it is "God himself who has brought them to you, ... Providence which has charged you to form them to piety" (Ibid.); or, providing a more interior motive, "If you really love Jesus Christ..." (MF 102.2).

To form children means also to "instruct" them, to "teach" them, to "implant" in the hearts of the children the holy love of Jesus Christ (Ibid.) This involves "forming them in piety... a piety that is solid" (MR 208.1); "forming them in Christian living" (MF 170.1), "in the spirit of Christian living", "to put into practice the truths of the Gospel"; forming them "to be disciples [of Jesus Christ]" (MF 102.2), who "has entrusted to your care the building up of his body which is the Church" (MR 205.3).

Like Saint Cassian or Saint Ignatius of Antioch, both of them martyrs, the Brothers apply themselves "with all possible care" by acquiring the necessary competence to instruct the children. The personal formation of the teachers means "feasting on", "filling oneself" with the sacred books (as did Saint Jerome: MF 170.1), in order to be "completely filled with God" (as was Saint John Chrysostom: MF 100.2).

When applied to children, the verb *former* can have a more restricted meaning as, for example, in expressions such as "having been formed to hold the pen properly" (CE 55 B), or controlling properly the carriage of the body and its parts (RB 3 A).

De La Salle will say of children who are not yet capable of serious reflection that "their minds are not as yet well formed" (MR 203.2). In this case, they "usually conform to the example of their teachers" (MR 202.2). At about the age of

12, "when their minds are well formed and they have been instructed in the mysteries of our religion" (GA 373 A), children should receive their first communion.

With "the intent of forming Christians" (Da II A), John Baptist de La Salle composed a series of catechisms entitled *The Duties of a Christian towards God and the Means to be Able to Perform them Well* (1703).

The seventeenth century was aware of this meaning of the verb *former*: to take someone as a model, to arrange, to instruct, to fashion, to propose examples for imitation, e.g., "This tutor has formed the mind of his disciple very well. He formed his style on that of Cicero". The originality of De La Salle consists in the fact that he "formed" schoolteachers for their specialized work and gave stability to their commitment to it. Among these teachers, a certain number of them became the first Brothers of the Christian Schools.

2. FORMING A NEW SOCIETY

De La Salle's Memoir on the Origins covers the first fourteen years (BER 22) of the emerging institution of the Society of Brothers, years that also saw the Founder discover his personal vocation. "I had thought that the supervision that I assumed over the schools and teachers would only amount to an external supervision which would not have obliged to anything more than to provide for their living expenses and to make sure that they did their work with piety and attention" (CL 10, 106). The difference between John Baptist de La Salle and his predecessors in the educational movement of the seventeenth century lies in the fact that he threw in his lot with the teachers and adopted their lifestyle, albeit after a progressive involvement lasting four or five years.

2.1. Forming *schoolteachers in Reims*

Considered at first by Nyel as "the protector and promoter of his work in Reims" (BL 1 166 B), Canon De La Salle was concerned about the situation of the teachers who had been recruited to open the schools at Saint-Maurice and Saint-Jacques. Accordingly, as Christmas was approach-

ing in 1679, he rented a house for them that was near his own.

In this way there was a developing reciprocity between the initiative of De La Salle and the response of the teachers. The teachers profited by their life together but not quite as much as the canon would have wished. As for Nyel, he was unable to keep track of the teachers from day to day (BL 1 170 A), and so he left the responsibility for their personal formation more and more in the hands of De La Salle.

De La Salle gave them a daily schedule (MAC 15, see translation¹ p. 24) and brought them into his home for meals, "during which there was reading; while De La Salle took these occasions to give them some useful suggestions of their duties as teachers" (MAC 17, translation¹ p. 27). During Holy Week in 1680 he kept them in his home all day long, from morning prayer until after night prayer. "In this way he motivated them to be faithful to the religious exercises he had prescribed for them earlier. The principal practices that he had enjoined were meditation, vocal prayer, and control of the senses. He had never before realized the need they had for this kind of support until he observed the teachers and had to deal with them close at hand" (MAC 17).

"He noticed in some of them, that their piety was superficial and vacillating; some of them even had base tendencies due to their lack of a good upbringing. Accordingly, he determined to form their exterior conduct and at the same time to develop their self-control" (MAC 18). Their life together was in this way directed to the formation of the teachers as total persons; it was not merely an academy where they were taught nothing more than how to carry out the duties required by their employment.

2.1.1. *Having them live in his own home*

Once Nyel saw the transformation of these five or six teachers, he urged the young canon to keep them permanently in his home. This was accomplished in 1681 on June 24, the day usually assigned for the renewal of leases in the province of Champagne. Nyel, who had been part of the group for six months (BER 45), had the joy of seeing the residence assume the form and the lifestyle of a community.

The Memoir on the Origins tells us of the profound feelings of repugnance that De La Salle had to overcome: "If I had even suspected that the care I was taking of the schoolteachers 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, especially at the beginning, as being inferior to my valet, the mere thought that I would have to live with them would have been insupportable to me. Indeed, I experienced a great deal of unpleasantness when I first had them come to my house. This feeling lasted for two years" (BL 1 169).

2.1.2. *A change takes place in the teachers*

"The first thing that the man of God did, after bringing the schoolteachers into his home, was to convince them that they should all go to confession to the same confessor" (BER 43). Very soon, in spite of his own reluctance to confuse the roles of superior and confessor, he did in fact become the confessor for them all. This produced "marvelous results" since "the servant of God had a remarkable talent for that ministry and a very special grace to perform it well" (BER 44).

"At the end of six months, as Christmas was approaching, he sent M. Nyel to Rethel to establish schools there" (BER 45), but he was unwilling to send with him any of the young teachers since he felt it was still necessary "to keep them with him in order to complete their **formation**" (BL 1 180 D). In this way there developed a division of responsibilities: Nyel would guide the communities in Rethel, Guise and Laon, while "De La Salle guided and **formed** the community at Reims" (BER 45). De La Salle had not wanted to expose the young teachers to the risks involved in a new foundation: "All that he had done up until then in Reims to **form** the schoolteachers was, in his mind, only a first step toward the perfection to which he wanted to bring them. He feared to expose these tender young plants prematurely" (MAR 32, translation¹ p. 21).

But "once he thought he had brought the schools to the point where they could survive" (MAC 24, translation¹, p. 24), the teachers that he had brought to live with him became disenchanted with the lifestyle they had so much appreciated in

the beginning. Almost all of them went away and “renounced forever the idea that they had entertained of devoting themselves to the instruction of the young” (MAC 25, translation¹, p. 24). No doubt, they did not all leave of their own accord, since Brother Bernard explains that “De La Salle was even obliged to send away some of them who, although they were devout enough, had neither the talent nor the calling for teaching school, and who had been accepted in the first place only because they were needed” (BER 46). And so, “in a short time, that is to say in less than ten months, it was an entirely new community composed, with one or two exceptions, of entirely new candidates” (Ibid.).

The dialogue between John Baptist de La Salle had thus come to an impasse. The ideal of the Christian teacher that he wanted to share with them had at first seduced them, but then became a burden. That was because it was a matter of forming candidates to a way of life that can only be entered as the result of a call.

Momentarily discouraged by these departures, De La Salle soon saw a new generation of teachers present themselves: “It was after the first six months, toward the beginning of the year 1682, that new candidates came forth who had both the talent for the school and piety as well as the disposition to be able to live in community. And it was thus that there began to appear in the house an authentic form of community life” (BER 47).

2.2. *They form a new community*

Maillefer, too, notes the radical transformation that occurred. The new arrivals, “together with the small number that had remained faithful **formed** a new community, more numerous and more perfect” (MAC 26, translation¹, p. 25). The new regulations adapted to their lifestyle, a poor but identical habit which distinguished them from people of the world (Ibid.), and eventually calling themselves by the name “Brother”, all these characteristics which were developed between 1682 and 1686 reveal that a very distinctive group was coming into being, the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

Prior to these developments, John Baptist de

La Salle himself had taken a new step forward: on June 24 1682 he left the mansion on the Rue Sainte-Marguerite and went to live with the teachers in the house on the Rue Neuve “which the Brothers can rightly honor as the cradle of their Institute” (BL 1 224).

2.2.1. *The influence of Père Barré*

The Memoir of the Origins has already been cited to indicate Canon De La Salle’s reluctance to admit the teachers into his home.

In order to resolve the “great perplexity” (BL 1 171) on what course to follow, he had recourse to Père Barré, “the one man in the world who seemed the best suited in these circumstances to give De La Salle advice that would conform to the designs of God” (Ibid.). “Since he was the first to conceive of and the first to establish the Christian and gratuitous schools in France, he had a special grace in this matter” (BL 1 172).

“In this period of uncertainty, God provided De La Salle with an opportunity to make the trip to Paris on some business. He took the opportunity to go to visit Père Barré, who at the time was living with the Minimis in the Place Royale” (BER 37).

The holy Minim strongly advised De La Salle to bring the teachers to live in his own home. He encouraged the canon to commit himself totally to the schools, “fully convinced that God had chosen him to direct the work that Barré himself had not been able to bring about. Père Barré had succeeded well enough with the schools for girls, but those he established here and there for boys, especially at Saint-Gervais, where he had six teachers, were less satisfactory. The teachers he recruited became so discouraged that they began to go astray and left, one after the other” (Ibid.).

We have already noted how De La Salle followed the advice of the Minim and how authentic vocations came to replace those who had departed. How was it possible that he would have a better chance to succeed than his advisor? De La Salle was not a religious. Therefore it was possible for him to live on a day-to-day basis with the first Brothers and so to devote himself completely to the formation of those with whom he had become completely incarnated.

2.3. *A vocation to be a formator*

"Towards the end of the year 1682, it became apparent to De La Salle that God was calling him to take charge of the schools" (BER 49), an important statement which could well be based on the Memoir on the Origins (BL 1 193 D). The discovery of what was needed to stabilize the teachers in their vocation was, for the young canon, the beginning of an awareness that his personal vocation was changing.

Now that he was living with the teachers, he was thereby exposed to being challenged by them. When they became anxious about their future prospects and their security, he replied that they should abandon themselves to divine providence. "You speak inspiringly in the midst of your ease, they told him, ... if our enterprise fails, you will land on your two feet and the ruin of our situation would not involve your own... Where shall we go and what shall we do if the schools fail or if people tire of us?" (BL 188 C).

This intervention sets in opposition the "we" and the "you". He was still not one of them, he was only living among them. His word had no formative weight because it did not arise out of their situation itself. (It was doubtless this perception which would lead him to work tirelessly to have a Brother elected to head the community). Here is a new moment of discernment: "If I remain what I am and they remain what they are, their temptation will persist" (BL 1 191 C D). "I must decide to resign my canony to free myself for the care of the schools and the training of the teachers who will direct them. Finally, since I no longer feel any attraction to the vocation of a canon, it would seem that it has already left me before I have given it up" (BL 1 192 B).

On August 16, 1683, De La Salle resigned his canony in favor of Father Faubert, a deserving priest. As for De La Salle's patrimony, the teachers expected, as did everyone else, that he would use it to set up a foundation for the schools. But on the advice of Père Barré, he distributed his wealth to feed the poor during the famine of the winter of 1683-1684. Now, he could write, as he did in the Memoir on the Habit, "This community is neither established nor founded on anything except divine Providence" (MH 2).

When Adrien Nyel returned to Rouen on October 26, 1685, this left the schools in Rethel, Guise and Laon without direction. (Chateau-Porcien it seems had already been closed). Yielding to the pleas of his friend, Father Guyart, the pastor of the church of Saint-Pierre at Laon, De La Salle finally agreed to assume also the direction of these establishments (BL 1 230-231).²

2.4. *Forming a small congregation*

"Seeing himself in charge of a number of schoolmasters scattered in various towns, De La Salle thought that the time had come to form them into a small congregation" (Ibid.).

His meditations on the founders of religious orders, give a graphic description of this process of foundation. Writing on Saint Norbert, De La Salle writes: "The Spirit of God which animated this saint led him to resign his benefices, sell his patrimonial goods and distribute the money to the poor... He led, besides, an extremely austere life and chose for himself several companions... Like him, they lived in great austerity and bodily mortification... Their religious exercises consisted in obedience, applying themselves to prayer and mortification, and in preaching the Gospel. It was in this way that Saint Norbert **formed** his order" (MF 132.2).

The progressive pattern of renouncement that we have just seen in De La Salle is at the same time the process by which the community of the Christian Schools was formed. Furthermore, the Founder wrote for his Brothers that the purpose of their Institute was the same as that of Saint Ignatius who "began to **form** his company" (MF 148.3), as also that of Saint Norbert.

Blain portrays De La Salle at the head of twenty or so teachers, thinking "of forming them into a small congregation" ... "To change the group of teachers 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" (BL 1 231-232).

The Founder did all this from within the community, since he shared the condition of the teachers and devoted himself to forming them. It was not as if an ecclesiastical superior were leading the

teachers into the structure of an established religious order. (In this regard, it is important to understand not in a technical sense the expression “regular community” as Blain uses it). The structure of the Community of the Christian Schools derives from the various assemblies held by the Brothers and their creativity in establishing programs of formation.

2.4.1. *The Assembly of 1686*

From the feast of the Ascension until Trinity Sunday in 1686 (and not 1684 — see CL 2 21-22), “the humble Founder called together his principal disciples... He did not suggest to them his own views, nor did he insinuate his own ideas. He left them free to think and to say whatever they liked... All that he reserved for himself was to listen to them and to follow whatever the majority might decide” (BL 1 232-233).

This was not the moment to set for themselves a definitive Rule. “Apart from divine revelation, nothing but experience can teach people all that they need to know about the commitments they might wish to contract... In a word, by having the Brothers live it first, the Founder established little by little what he hoped to see established one day on the basis of wise regulations” (Ibid. 233-234). The same attitude prevailed with regard to perpetual vows. They were content for the present with a temporary vow of obedience.

Here can be seen at work his formative strategy, helping the teachers to take into their own hands the organization of their community life, modifying the rules as the need would arise. Since the question of the habit was not yet ready for decision, this was remanded to “the prudence of the virtuous Founder” (Ibid. 238), a matter which he settled a few months later.

It is worth rereading the inspired page where Blain comments on the name “Brothers” by which the teachers would be known from then on: “The change in the habit brought about a change in their name... This name reminds them that the charity which gave birth to their Institute must be its soul and its life; that it should dominate all their deliberations and give **form** to all their proposals” (Ibid. 241).

2.5. *“I had begun by forming Brothers” (L 117)*

“May I say, Sir, that you were apparently misinformed when you were told that I have been doing much good in the Church and that I have been sending teachers to towns and villages to teach the young. It is true that I had begun by **forming** Brothers to conduct schools gratuitously, but for some time now I have been relieved of the responsibility for directing them. It is one of the Brothers, Brother Barthélemy by name, who is now in charge of them. He lives here in this same house and the Brothers, even those of Saint-Denis acknowledge him as their Superior” (BL 2 413; L 117).

In this letter, written toward the end of his life, the Founder recognized his vocation as a formator for the Brothers, and he distinguishes this role from the responsibility of being Superior which he was finally able to hand over to a Brother from the Society. Despite his humble protestation, one can see that the work which God had led him to undertake had met with success.

It is well known with what tenacity De La Salle had tried to persuade the Brothers to choose a Superior from among their number “since the Good of the Institute demanded that it be governed by one of them” (BL 1 262). In the face of the opposition to a lay Superior on the part of some “ecclesiastical authorities”, the Founder was planning to prepare Brother Henri l’Heureux for the priesthood. The death of that Brother gave strength to the conviction that the Brothers should all remain laymen.

The Memoir on the Habit, composed undoubtedly in 1690, presents in concise fashion the lay character of the Community of the Christian Schools: “Those who compose this community are all laymen, without clerical training and with an education that is at best mediocre. Providence has willed that those few who presented themselves for admission to the community and had received the tonsure, or had begun clerical study, should not continue along that path” (MH 9).³ (For the meaning of these terms in the original French, see CL 5 304). This refusal of the priesthood is something close to a fundamental presupposition: “the exercises of the community and the

work in the schools demand the commitment of the total person" (MH 10). The teachers recruited by Nyel did not have the vocation to become Brothers. In several places, on the other hand, the biographers report that some young men, attracted by the spiritual personality of De La Salle and by the atmosphere in the group that he animated, renounced clerical studies in order to join the community (BL in 1 224 C says "several"; in 236 A he says "most").

2.5.1. *Forming a novitiate*

Letter 117 makes allusion to the teachers sent into the villages. We shall shortly have the occasion to see De La Salle, probably in 1687, contribute to the establishment of a "seminary" for teachers in the rural schools. Blain depicts the zealous Founder, during the same period, "forming another seminary distinct from that of the Brothers" (BL 1 278).

The Founder himself uses the same term in writing from Marseille on December 16, 1712 to Brother Gabriel Drolin in Rome: "It is to be expected that the novitiate that I have just begun will be well **formed**" (L 31.9). The preceding letter says something similar "I expect that the novitiate will soon be ready".

The Memoir on the Habit mentions three distinct institutions: the Community of the Christian Schools, the Seminary for Rural Teachers, and "some young boys who have the capacity and the disposition for piety; as soon as it is judged appropriate and they themselves determine to do so, they then enter the community" (MH 7).

2.5.2. *The preparatory novitiate*

Blain gives us further details about the origin of this last-mentioned institution: "A third community, distinct from the other two, was formed at about the same time in De La Salle's house [on the Rule Neuve]. It was composed 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... They were absolutely determined to be the children of the one they had chosen as their father... He made of them a group apart and assigned to them exercises suitable for their age and likely to nourish their vocation, preparing them for the Brothers' ministry and helping them

to grow in virtue and piety... This junior "seminary" for these young fellows, which served as a preparatory center and a novitiate for the Institute, was a place the servant of God loved to visit" (BL 1 280).

Brother Maurice-Auguste does not hesitate to see in the program that Blain details the schedule of an authentic novitiate (CL 11 50). Blain compares it with the novitiate at Saint Yon without discerning any essential differences. The Brothers who organized the junior novitiates in the nineteenth century adopted the same program without scruple.

It should be noted in passing that, in accordance with the dictionaries of the time, that the verb *former* is a term applied to the gardener who, e.g., should "take care to form the trees." The terms *pépinière* (BL 1 312 A) and *séminaire* (BL 1 280) that Blain uses to describe this institution correspond to this cultivation of plants and trees.

2.5.3. *Establishing a novitiate to form candidates*

The transfer of the "seminary" for junior Brothers to the parish of Saint-Sulpice proved to be its demise. The candidates, assigned frequently to serve the parish Masses, were distracted from their intention to enter the Community of the Christian Schools. By the end of 1690 this institution disappeared, as did the "seminary" at Reims. To make matters worse, half of the community Brothers left. The Founder saw his work profoundly shaken.

After considerable reflection, he was inspired, as Blain relates, to adopt a four-point program which concluded in this fashion: "to establish a novitiate to **form** candidates" (BL 1 312). This time it was no longer a question of young men between 14 and 17 years old. The novitiate was to serve, on the one hand, to form new subjects who would be forthcoming, and, on the other hand, "to assemble there under his eyes all those who had entered the community in the previous three or four years in order to renew their spirit by a good retreat" during the vacation period.

They had such a great need to complete their formation that the holy Founder "thought that he could not do better than to keep them with him for as long a time as possible for the purpose of **forming** them by all the exercises of the interior

life. By good fortune, he had at his disposal some externs from the Seminary for Rural Teachers, and these he used to replace the Brothers that he kept at Vaugirard” (BL 1 315).

The formation of the novices remained a major preoccupation of the Founder, who consecrated a notable part of his efforts to this work, even when he would appoint a master of novices to this function. The letter to Brother Barthélemy, written no doubt in March 1718, since the Founder addresses him as the Superior, manifests the acute awareness the Founder had of the importance of this formation:

“I am writing to you, my very dear Brother, because I am astounded to see the sorry state of your novitiate: the two or three novices are not being **formed** at all and they do not observe the rules any better than when they first entered the house. The new master of novices, himself not having been **formed** for his work, scarcely knows what he should do or what the novices should do. He says he has no rule to follow and neither do the novices... You know that the strength of the Institute depends on whether the novices are well **formed** and fully observant of the rules” (L 4).

The zeal of De La Salle was not limited to the formation of the Brothers. He also played a significant role in the formation of teachers for the rural schools.

3. FORMING SCHOOLTEACHERS

We have already seen in the Memoir on the Habit some references to the Seminary for Teachers in the Rural Schools.

3.1. A professional formation

“There [in Reims] attention is also paid to **forming** schoolteachers for the rural areas in a house distinct from the community which is called a ‘seminary.’ Those who are formed there live there for only a few years until they are completely formed both in piety and in what relates to their employment” (MH 4). The vocation of the Brothers’ community has a much broader scope, even if, before the adoption of the habit, “several candidates came in order to be given a formation and then

to leave” (MH 43). The future teachers “are instructed to sing, to read, and to write perfectly... and then they are placed in some small town or village to perform there the function of clerks. Once they have been assigned, they have no further relationship to the community, except perhaps a sense of gratitude” (MH 6).

3.1.1. Competence

The “Conduct of the Christian Schools”, in several contexts provides a detailed treatise on competence for the beginning teacher, with all that he needs to know about methodology, pedagogy, and psychology, as applicable in the first instance to the Brother in his school.

The “Conduct” lists the reasons why students are often absent, among them that “this can come from the fact that the teacher is a beginner who is not yet sufficiently **formed** and does not know how to conduct himself in a school” (CE 184 D). The remedy is not to assign to such a one the sole responsibility for a class “until he can be completely **formed** by a Brother with extensive experience in the schools” (CE 185 A), a reference no doubt to the Brother that the preface calls “the **formator** of beginning teachers” (CE V D, VI A).

The teacher, therefore, “ought to be **formed** to do several things at the same time: to supervise the class, to follow the reader and to correct him when he makes a mistake” (CE 19 C). The Brother also ought to know to give his lessons adapted to the ability of the children: “that is why you ought to study the subject matter and to **form** yourself to understand well the questions and the answers you will use during catechism” (MD 33.3 on the Gospel of the Good Shepherd).

3.2. A formation that was needed but not as yet generally available

This use of the verb “to form” to indicate a professional formation is hardly ever found in the dictionaries of the period. Furetière, as well as the Dictionary of Trévoux, give a meaning that comes close but not as a technical term: “To take for a model, to equip, to instruct, to fashion, to propose examples to imitate, e.g., a tutor has formed well the minds of his students; a person is formed according to good models; a young man formed for

the world.” There is nothing here that expresses exactly a complete preparation for a profession, above all for that of a schoolteacher. The reason is that such formation was unfortunately lacking. There were, however, many proposals in that direction. Brother Maurice-Auguste has researched those from 1685-1688 in a series of four articles in the Bulletin of the Institute from 1969-1970.

3.2.1. *The proposal of M. de Chennevières*

On the day after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes (October 18, 1685), M. de Chennevières, “priest and servant of the poor,” gathered the signatures of 25 of the 42 pastors in Paris, some Doctors of the Sorbonne, as well as the Grand Chantre of Notre Dame, to support his manifesto: “The Incomparable Necessity of Establishing in Every Diocese Seminaries for Schoolteachers, one for Males and one for Females.”

“Ever since the world was the world, it has never been heard nor spoken of that there was ever in France any specialized academy to **form** and to equip good schoolteachers capable of instructing and **forming** from the ground up the minds of children... It is true that some pious persons, filled more with zeal and good will than ability and influence, have taken on the duty of beginning something along these lines, but not being supported in such a lofty and holy enterprise, they have not been able to produce any results.”

3.2.2. *The work and the proposals of Demia*

“The Urgent Address Concerning the Establishment of a Kind of Seminary for the **Formation** of Schoolteachers” of Charles Demia can be dated sometime after February 1688, since he proposes to finance these “seminaries” with the confiscated goods of the exiled Huguenots.

Children are described as “soft wax, which one can **form** into all kinds of shapes: if the teachers are virtuous, they will make angels out of them, if the teachers are found to be vicious, they will make demons out of them... There is no skill that does not require a suitable time for apprenticeship before being considered a master [the French word for teacher is *maître*]. Will someone say that the art of teaching young people and governing their minds wisely... will not also require in truth an apprenticeship, which cannot be done properly ex-

cept in a community established for the **formation** of such teachers?... It should be remarked that neither priests nor married persons ought to be considered as suitable candidates for teaching in the schools... If his majesty were to establish seminaries to **form** such teachers, he would thereby procure for the whole kingdom the advantages that the cities of Lyons and Reims are beginning to enjoy by reason of the establishment of such seminaries for teachers.”

Demia had already 20 years of experience. His seminary in Lyons formed a number of future priests who were willing to devote some years to elementary teaching before being appointed to a parish. Such an arrangement led the institution, after the death of its Founder, to discontinue the program and to prepare thereafter the future priests for parish work only. But the foundation for women, known as the Sisters of Saint Charles, would perdure.

3.3. **De La Salle’s attempts to establish “seminaries” for teachers**

The experience at Reims to which Demia alludes seems to be that of the Brothers’ community at Reims, but not the Seminary for Rural Teachers. De La Salle believed that lay teachers could have a permanent vocation, something that Demia contemplated only with reluctance. That is what gave birth to the Brothers of the Christian Schools.⁴

Aware that the Brothers would need to lead a community life, their Founder soon became preoccupied also with the needs of the teachers in rural parishes that could support only one teacher living alone. There are notarized documents dated April 2, 1683 and August 20, 1685 that contain rough drafts for a “seed bed” for such teachers. The first effective realization of such plans seems to have been the “seminary” on the Rue Neuve, opened, it seems certain, in the fall of 1687.

It seems that at each juncture, De La Salle responded to certain precise requests. He was approached because he appeared to be able to provide the type of formation that was wanted. Blain describes the formation of these teachers as roughly similar to that provided for the Brothers, but in a distinct institution: “he formed another

seminary separated from that of the Brothers" (BL 1 278).

The institution was without doubt far advanced for its time. But once the positions were filled with the teachers they had hoped for, the rural pastors saw no need to provide for others to follow. The evidence is that the institution had collapsed by the year 1691. It experienced a rebirth in Paris in the parish of Saint-Hippolyte from 1699 to 1705; its ruin was caused by the "schism" of Brother Nicolas Vuyart (BL 1 313). Then the Clément affair put an end to the "seminary" at Saint-Denis. After that experience, De La Salle gave up all interest in establishing such seminaries (BL 2 56).

In connection with the "second attempt to establish... a seminary for schoolteachers for the rural areas in the parish of Saint-Hippolyte in Paris," Blain asserts that "no other establishment so interested that holy man. The plan that he had conceived for his Institute included both the Institute of the Brothers for the cities and the formation of Schoolteachers for the countryside" (BL 1 364).⁵ However that may be, it is obvious that the "seminaries" that were in fact established by De La Salle and the Brothers to whom he entrusted them enjoyed a remarkable success. Blain quotes a rather lengthy letter from the pastor of a parish who recognized the quality of these teachers. He thought that if they were to be followed up after completing the seminary course, they could well be reorganized into a third order (BL 2 179).⁶

4. FORMATION IN THE LIGHT OF THE CREATION AND THE INCARNATION

We have seen how De La Salle set about providing formation for the Brothers and other Christian teachers. But he never made explicit the profound significance of this formation. By studying his use of language we can, nonetheless, attempt to discern some of the constituent elements.

4.1. *Forming acts of faith*

It would require a full study to develop the theme of interiority in the writings of De La Salle.

It will suffice here to note such expressions as "the hand **forms** the sign of the holy cross" (Da VII D), that "the heart **forms** acts of faith" (Da 7 A) and, that God himself **forms** in their hearts the desire to do what the Church requires" (I 22 B).

De La Salle writes that it is not with the mouth alone that we **form** an act of contrition (I 100 A) and a firm purpose of amendment (I 110 B); we ought to **form** in our hearts a sincere resolution (Da 297 E); concupiscence **forms** obstacles within us (Da 164 C). Again, like David, who **formed** prayers in his heart (Da 470 C), the communicant asks Jesus for the desired dispositions: "It is up to you to **form** them in my heart" (I 247 E). In this way "prayer **forms** our hearts into temples for Jesus Christ" (Da 418 E).

The approach is sometimes psychological, as when the Founder writes that evil desires are **formed** within the mind (Da 149 B and D), that one has a plan that is **formed** (MR 204.3, I. 206 E) or that one **forms** an intention (R 183.12, R 220.18) or a resolution (EM 82 A, R 21.15). But the approach is more properly moral when he writes that it is not permitted "to **form** one's own conscience in matters that are not entirely evident" (Da 153 B).

4.2. *A rational creature formed in the image of God*

Sometimes the verb "to form" means simply "to make": "it [St. Yon] **forms** a veritable town" (MF 272 D); "the bread and wine are such as nature **formed** them" (Da 246 A). But in the context of creation the word often carries a quite different meaning: the body of Adam "was **formed** from the dust of the earth" (Da 22 A), and "God **formed** the body [of the woman] from one of Adam's ribs" (Ibid. B).

In the questions and answers in the catechisms, the equivalent meaning seems clear: "From what did God **form** the body of man?" (GA 233 D), "of the first man?" (Db 30 E): "He **formed** him from the dust of the earth" (GA 322 D, Db 30 E). "From what did God **form** the soul of the first man?" (GA 322 D), "From what did God make or **form** the soul of the first man?" (Db 31 A): "He made it from nothing, since He had created it" (Ibid.).

A powerful meaning is thereby conveyed when

he speaks of man as a “rational creature **formed** in the image of God” (Db 30 B), or as a “rational creature created in the image of God” (GA 322 C).

All this gives a new perspective on the formation of children which we have already examined (See 1 and 3 above): the process of formation participates in God’s creative act. That is the source of the optimism of the Christian educator, trusting in the potential for development that has been put there by the Creator in every human being. “God has formed man in His image” (Dictionary of Furetère) is a classic formulation of the seventeenth century.

De La Salle himself found the dignity of the human being to be rooted in the divine image: sin “makes men like unto beasts,” and “desfigures in us the image of God” (I 178 D). The preface of the *Rules of Politeness and Christian Civility* gives as a foundation for these rules the obligation to recognize the presence of God and the respect that is due to the members of Jesus Christ (RB III). This establishes a link between creation and incarnation, such as the Church celebrates on the feasts of the birth and the immaculate conception of Mary.

4.3. *That which was needed to form the man-God*

In this connection, it helps to reread the entire first point of the meditation for the nativity of the Most Blessed Virgin: “God, who guides all things with wisdom, having the design to save men... it was necessary that the body of this holy virgin be so perfectly **formed** and organized..., [she] who would be called upon to **form** the man-God” (MF 163.1). Indeed, “God had **formed** her in this way, both in soul and in body” (MF 82.1) in order to make her capable of containing and **forming** within her body the man-God” (MF 82.2).

“The body of Jesus Christ, having been **formed** in the womb of the Most Blessed Virgin” (Db 35 D), faith teaches us that it is God Himself who has brought that body into being: “It was the Holy Spirit who **formed** the body of Jesus Christ from the pure blood of the Most Holy Virgin and who, at the same time, created his soul and united it to the body which He had **formed**” (Db 25-26).

There is a striking parallel between Mary, formed by God in a special way, and Jesus, formed in the womb of Mary; between the language

of the *Duties of a Christian* and that of the *Meditations for the Principal Feasts of the Year*. It is the same mystery on which the Brothers meditate and which they proclaim.

The meditation for the third Sunday of Advent reminds the Brothers that it is not enough to be aware that salvation is available: “It is necessary that God Himself, through Jesus Christ, Our Lord, show us the road that we must follow... It is God who has **formed** us for that purpose and who has given us his Spirit as a guarantee. It is by God alone, therefore, that our straight path to heaven is **formed**” (MD 3.3).

The expression in Ga 4, 19 gives to the verb “to form” the meaning of engender. This is found in the Bérullian School as P. Deville notes (See *L’école française*, p. 118): “they desired that Jesus might ‘be formed in them’.” De La Salle uses the two verbs interchangeably: “You are destined by God to engender children for Jesus Christ and even to bring forth and engender Jesus Christ in their hearts” (MF 157.1). “To **form** Jesus Christ in the hearts of the children confided to your care” (MF 80.2).

4.4. *Forming the Church*

On the day of Pentecost, after receiving the Holy Spirit, the apostles and disciples of Jesus Christ “began to **form** a new society of the faithful” (Da 63 A). This was no merely human initiative: “It was Jesus Christ who **formed** it; he continues to **form** it every day by uniting the faithful into a single society” (Da 73 B).

The Father and the Son sent the Holy Spirit to the apostles “to fill them with the Holy Spirit and his grace, and to **form** the Church” (Db 51 B). By extension, Saint Joachim is worthy of veneration because “he gave to the world the most holy Virgin Mother of Jesus Christ... as the one who contributes to **form** the Church and to whom the Church is indebted for what it has become” (MF 157.1).

The Founder of the Brothers does not tell them that they contribute to forming the Church. Also, we ought to avoid giving too strong an interpretation to the expression that we have cited concerning the founders of religious orders (See 2.4), e.g. “to **form** his company” (MF 148.3).

Finally, concerning the spirit of faith there is in the Collection and in the Common Rules a usage of the verb “to form” which can lead to ambiguity: does it mean to “form” the spirit of faith? The spirit of the Institute is “firstly a spirit of faith, which should induce all those who **form** it” (R 72.12, RC 3.2) not to look upon anything except with the eyes of faith.

The parallel with the first article added to Chapter 2 of the Rule of 1718, seems to provide an interpretation: “That which is of the utmost importance, and to which the greatest attention should be given in a Community is that all those who compose it possess the spirit peculiar to it” (RC1 2.1).

“To form” in the ambiguous passage is the equivalent of “to compose,” to compose a community, as these cenobites “who were said to **form** a monster rather than a real community” (MD 7.2). There is, perhaps, a more active nuance in the passage, the idea of playing a part in the gathering process: forming the Institute need not mean, as in 2.4, to found as the “Founder,” but to participate actively in its constitution, by being “living” members, as distinct from the “dead member” spoken of in the text.

In this text, we find all the dynamism that characterized the activity of John Baptist de La Salle as a “formator,” notably by leading the Brothers to become an active part in the emergence of their Institute, putting himself in the background so that they might assume full responsibility for it.

This was not at all a human tactic, but one calculated to liberate the powers that God had given them for the human and Christian formation of “the children of the artisans and the poor.”

¹ Dom Elie MAILLEFER, *the Life of John Baptist De La Salle*, translated by Brother Didymus John. PSC. 1963.

² The biographers tell us that priests sometimes made a retreat under the direction of De La Salle and that he often had priests as his houseguests. An entire study might be made of De La Salle as a formator of priests.

³ Without Latin the Brothers could not benefit from ecclesiastical studies. Furthermore to evangelize the young from the lower classes, they had to develop a “culture” adapted to their milieu. This would lead De La Salle to compose writings for the formation of both the Brothers and for the children.

⁴ The integration between the different aspects of formation (professional and religious, for example) did not always go smoothly. On the one hand, the Founder had often to challenge the Brothers with respect to the duties of their religious commitment and the duties of their employment (See the meditations for the end of the year); on the other hand, we have the example of some Brothers refusing to study drawing so as not to be tempted to leave the community as had those who had been teaching in the Sunday Academy (MAC 83 and MAR 208, translation¹, p. 120).

⁵ This does not at all oblige us to accept the view that the “manuscript 103” represents the thought of De La Salle. It is known that this text presents the draft of a threefold plan: in addition to the Brothers for the city and the “seminary” for the rural teachers, there would be a society of priests to provide spiritual direction for the teachers and to hear the confessions of the students. Brother Maurice-Auguste sees in this document, rather, the hand of the Lazarist Fathers. Nothing is said there that the seminaries envisioned would be under the direction of the Brothers.

⁶ Rigault, Volume VIII, 99, describes the beginnings of a sort of a Third Order in Belgium “in the spirit of De La Salle”: the “Society of Christian Teachers” formed by the graduates of the normal school at Carlsbourg, about 1890.

Complementary themes:

Brothers of the Christian Schools; Catechism; Christian Teacher; Employment; Heart; Novitiate; Profession.

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(The other works cited by HOURY, including BL and — see note 1 — BER, are not generally available. There is a translation of Ma that does not distinguish MAC from MAR. In any case, English versions would translate “former” and its derivatives with a variety of English expressions, so the force of the citations would be lost. See translator's note at the beginning.)

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