

**JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE  
AND THE BROTHERS  
OF THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS:  
FORMED BY THE SPIRIT (1/2)**

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A story comes out of Africa that speaks lucidly about the phenomenon of getting and keeping ourselves together—body and soul. The story is about a caravan of traders in the last century that had been pushing their porters hard. Eventually, the porters stopped; efforts to keep going failed; and the traders demanded to know what was wrong. The Africans explained: "We have been traveling so long and so fast that we need to wait for our souls to catch up with our bodies."

What the porters experience is our story, too. For over one hundred fifty years now, the Christian Brothers have been traveling long and fast in the United States. We need to wait for our 'souls,' that is, the Spirit of God, to catch up with our bodies. Our founder was a man who listened attentively to the movement of the Spirit in his life. John Baptist De La Salle responded freely and creatively to the Spirit in his ministry and in the founding of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. This essay intends only to present a provocative remembrance of certain aspects of the life of De La Salle using specific Lasallian texts. The complete writings of De La Salle are a monumental corpus of prose that includes more text than the Hebrew and Christian scriptures combined. The texts selected in this essay contextualize the life of De La Salle within the time period that he lived, and illuminate important aspects of his free response to the Spirit moving in his life. The texts were selected using four criteria:

- All the texts are traceable to De La Salle as the principal author.
- All the texts are autobiographical in content, explicitly or implicitly.
- All the texts offer a concise representation of certain characteristics or orientations of de La Salle that are consistent with the wider body of texts.
- All the texts, for the most part, have been underutilized as sources for gaining a critical understanding of de La Salle.

Through these texts, it will become clear that de La Salle responded freely and creatively to the movement of the Spirit by creating and defining a new ministry in the church and the world.

**De La Salle: A Priest of the Counter-Reformation**

John Baptist de La Salle was born in Rheims in 1651, about 100 years after the Council of Trent. De La Salle was a member of a leading bourgeois family and a canon at the

Cathedral of Rheims. He was a well-educated priest, a doctor of theology, who moved about freely in the Counter-Reformation Church of 17th century France. The reform movement now known as the French School of Spirituality was the theological and sociological context of his entire professional journey, and its influence on De La Salle is easily identified in his writings. When we accept this context, the language of De La Salle becomes even more meaningful and the transformative power of the life and work of De La Salle becomes even more incredible.

**De La Salle: Seed for a New Community**

In the spring of 1679, John Baptist de La Salle met Adrien Nyel at the house of the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus, about one year after De La Salle's ordination. Over the following several years, De La Salle became progressively more involved in establishing free schools for poor boys in Rheims. After helping Nyel establish his schools in Rheims, in December 1679, De La Salle narrowed the distance between himself and the school teachers by renting a house for them, bringing himself to the threshold of a world to which he was more or less a stranger. In April 1680, De La Salle decided to invite the teachers into his own home for meals, bringing himself to the edge of his own family and culture. In June 1681, De La Salle made the momentous decision to invite the teachers to live in his own home, bringing himself a first-hand experience of the social miseries of his native city. In June 1682, De La Salle, with the teachers, chose to move into a modest building on the Rue Neuve, separating himself from the comfortable world in which he had grown up, and placing himself on the periphery, a part of the world of the poor. In August 1683, the Founder resigned his canonry and, by the Spring of 1684, his patrimony was essentially divested following the famine of the preceding winter. Little by little, De La Salle progressively, almost unknowingly, responded to the movement of the Spirit at the boundary between his own bourgeois culture and the culture of the poor. The response was a struggle linked to specific historical events, but it was always effected by the decisive conversion of De La Salle standing at the boundary between two cultures, looking outside himself, to the poor and abandoned, and seeing the face of God.

In the *Memoir of the Beginnings*, De La Salle reflects back incredulously on this period in his life, seeing the movement of the Spirit working gently and imperceptibly. Indeed, De La Salle did not realize that his willingness to advise the eager Nyel would eventually lead him to a life's work that was completely unforeseen and unthinkable:

*I had imagined that the care which I assumed of the schools and the masters would amount only to a marginal involvement committing me to no more than providing for the subsistence of the masters and ensuring that they acquitted themselves of their tasks with piety and devotedness.*

*It was as a result of two occurrences, namely my meeting with Monsieur Nyel and the proposition put forward by this lady (Madame l'Eveque, an early sponsor of the schools), that I began to concern myself with schools for poor boys. Previously I had given no thought at all to the matter, . . . and I had never entertained the notion of doing anything of the kind. If in fact I had ever thought that the obligation of charity which prompted my concern for the welfare of the schoolmasters would lead me to feel it a duty to live with them I would have abandoned the work. For, from a natural point of view, I considered as inferior to my manservant the men I was obliged, especially in the first stages of the under-*

taking, to employ in the schools, and the very thought that I would have to live with them would have been unbearable. It was, in fact, a source of great trouble to me that, at an early stage, I brought them to live in my house, a situation which lasted for two years. Evidently this was the reason why God, who directs all things with wisdom and with gentleness and is not at all accustomed to force the inclination of men, wishing to draw me entirely into undertaking the care of the schools, did so in a quite imperceptible way, without my having foreseen it in the beginning.

The first contact with the teachers introduced De La Salle to a world and a culture of which he had known little. Previously, De La Salle had "never entertained the notion" of establishing schools or working with teachers. It was through the concrete contact with teachers that the real needs of the teachers themselves, as well as the poor and abandoned children, became apparent to De La Salle. In response to those needs, De La Salle made successive commitments to the teachers; commitments that he would have "abandoned" had he known where they would have led; commitments that put him further and further into the teachers' world and culture.

The most impressive feature of the thought of De La Salle in this Memoir is his unswerving orientation in the direction of God's will, that is, his free and willing response to the movement of the Spirit. Between 1679 and 1684, the needs of the teachers and the abandoned children crystallized into a call that was perceived as a call from God. De La Salle's search for the Spirit at the margin of society was characterized by attention to the daily, existential events of human living.

Hence, the unforeseen consequences of the entire movement were divided into decisive, hidden moments of revelation. De La Salle was led to a religious reading of the successive commitments he had made and his reading was accompanied by a decisive commitment that would imply certain breaks: breaks that invoked criticism from his family and friends, breaks that brought suspicion from ecclesiastical authorities, and breaks that forced De la Salle to reexamine the exclusive nature of priestly ministry in the church. As Edwin Bannon powerfully states in *De La Salle: A Founder as Pilgrim*, "He made himself poor with the poor, for the sake of the poor. He had reached a point in his journey of faith when the road ahead was the only one that lay open to him. What that road would lead him to was still uncertain and unclear – except for the certainty and the clarity his faith gave him that Providence was guiding him along it, step by sure step." Through his choice to be with the poor, De La Salle became the crystallizing seed for a new ministry in the church.

### **The Nascent Community: Seed for a New Ministry in the Church**

The new community that De La Salle was gathering around himself experienced growth and success in the following years. The community became publicly identifiable through a distinct habit, a decision that was probably made in the winter of 1684-85. This distinctive habit of the teachers, different from secular persons or from the clergy, made their existence as a community visible to their pupils, the parishioners, and the general public of Rheims. The habit symbolized the teachers' communal identity during a time of growth and expansion. In 1686, the principal brothers of the community assembled for the first time to discuss and reflect on their shared experience of community and ministry, and to

discern where the Spirit was directing them. In February 1688, the first brothers were sent to Paris to work in the parish school of Saint Sulpice. In 1690, a second school opened in Paris, effectively establishing the new community outside Rheims. By this time, the brothers had expanded into three different dioceses (Rheims, Laon, and Paris) and had experienced considerable success in the running of schools. However, this period was not without very serious challenges from external authorities.

The *Memoir on the Habit* was written around 1690 in defense of the community of teaching brothers against the exercise of ecclesial authority. Specifically, it was a retort against the demand by the pastor of Saint Sulpice that the brothers wear a plain black cassock and an ecclesiastical collar, a demand the pastor had every right to make. Even so, the *Memoir on the Habit* was more than a defense of the brothers' garb. It was a shared interpretation of the brothers' experience and a public testament to the legitimacy of the new community within the wider church setting. De La Salle and the brothers argued not only for the importance of a distinctive habit, but for the right of the brothers to be an identifiable group of workers in the church, not ecclesiastics, yet still distinguishable from the laity.

De La Salle clearly sets out the characteristics of the new community from the beginning of the *Memoir on the Habit*:

*This community is usually called the community of Christian schools, and at present is founded only on Providence. Those who live in it keep a Rule and are dependent for everything, having no personal property, and observe complete uniformity*

*The members of this community are occupied in teaching gratuitous schools, in towns only, and in teaching catechism every day, even on Sundays and feasts.*

Complete trust in God, the observance of a Rule, and the sharing of property in common for the purpose of teaching in gratuitous schools portray this community as legitimately founded by God. In thus listing the name and purpose of the community and the nature of its activities, De La Salle was declaring that the new community had created a distinct, shared identity for itself within the existing community of the church and the surrounding city. The new group of teachers regarded themselves neither as clerical ministers nor as secular teachers. From the *Memoir on the Habit*, it cannot be said that the new community thought themselves in a better or worse state of life than clergy or secular persons. However, the new community clearly saw themselves as distinct from both groups.

The *Memoir on the Habit* was the voice of a group of persons who look upon themselves as belonging to a community, a community founded only on Providence, occupied in teaching gratuitously. In the Memoir, De La Salle stood within a community, looked back at the boundary he had crossed a few years earlier, and proclaimed that the community of the Christian schools was a legitimate group of men gathered by God, God-self, to share in the mission of the Church through the service of education. If the pastor of Saint Sulpice wanted to change the identity of the community, according to De La Salle, he had better "give the matter serious thought and examine with care the good and evil effects which may result" because this community gathered in response to the movement of the Spirit, and it would be a grave mistake to disregard God's will in the Spirit.

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