

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

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**The Enduring Seed:  
De La Salle's Additions to the Rules of 1705**

Between 1690 and 1715, the young community managed to spread throughout France and permanently establish a Society that lives on today, despite facing crisis, opposition and uncertainty on many fronts. In 1691, shortly after De La Salle wrote the *Memoir on the Habit*, he gathered with Gabriel Drolin and Nicolas Vuyart in the house at Vaugirard. They made a solemn oath to each other, a "heroic vow," to procure with all their ability and efforts the establishment of the Christian Schools. In 1694, a few years after establishing a novitiate at Vaugirard, De La Salle gathered twelve senior brothers at an assembly now recognized as the first General Chapter. The assembled brothers first discussed and then made perpetual vows of obedience, stability and association; they approved a written draft of the Rule; and they re-elected De La Salle as their superior. With the consolidation of the internal structure of the community, De La Salle was able to concentrate on his writings, especially a series of catechisms, the *Conduct of Schools* and the *Rules of Christian Politeness*. By 1719, brothers' communities were established in twenty-one cities throughout France. However, this growth was not without tension related to the ambiguity of finding a place in an established educational system. De La Salle and the community of brothers had to carve an educational niche in a setting controlled by ecclesiastical authorities, the Guild of the Writing Masters and the Masters of the Little Schools. In addition to the tensions involving the community, De La Salle received numerous personal attacks, including a dispute in 1712 that resulted in De La Salle's conviction for extorting money from a minor. Realizing his presence in Paris might threaten the establishment of the Society, De La Salle retreated to the South of France.

In 1714, the principal brothers of Paris called De La Salle back to Paris to resume the government of the Society. While De La Salle had been doubting his efforts to establish the Society, the letter written by these brothers expressed to De La Salle that his life's work had in fact not been in vain. For De La Salle, the letter was an expression of a living body that was conscious of itself and active and responsible. Personally assured of the continued existence of the Society, De La Salle returned to Paris and assumed a quiet advisory role in the government of the Society.

In 1717, a general assembly convened at St. Yon, outside the city of Rouen, to discuss and insure the union and uniformity of the Society. The assembly commissioned De La Salle to revise the 1705 edition of the *Regles Communes*. In his revisions, after almost forty years of living and working for the establishment of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, De La Salle set out with great attention to integrate and express with extreme clarity the insights he gained from the experience of fidelity in community that was his life.

The additions De La Salle made to the *Regles* represent his enduring message, and the community's enduring message, to the Brothers of the Christian Schools. Two of the critical additions he made can still be found in their entirety in our revised Rule of 1987. First, the prologue to a new chapter on Regularity:

*It is necessary that the Brothers take for the foundation and support of their observance of the Rule what Saint Augustine says at the beginning of his Rule: that those who live in community should, before all else, love God and next their neighbor because these are the principal commandments given to us by God and because any observance of the Rule is useless if separated from the observance of these two commandments and is quite useless for salvation because it is established in communities only for the purpose of giving members facility to observe with exactness the commandments of God.*

De La Salle's purpose was to emphasize that keeping the Rule, however essential to the effectiveness of the Institute's mission, could be valid only to the degree to which it manifested love for God and love for one's neighbor. Despite the heavy emphasis he had placed on uniformity and regularity in order to secure the establishment of the Institute, De La Salle wanted to leave his brothers with the message that love is the fulfillment of the law. This message is no less strident today than it was in 1718.

The prologue to the original chapter on the Spirit of the Institute, the second critical addition to the *Regles* by De La Salle, echoes the most central and the most vital elements of the life and spirituality of De La Salle. Looking back on the way the Spirit had moved him forward on a journey littered with pain and discouragement, De La Salle knew that faith was the bulwark which must sustain his disciples through out the difficulties of their mission. "That which is of the utmost importance, and to which the greatest attention should be given in an Institute is that all who compose it possess the spirit particular to it." The spirit of the institute is a spirit of faith. De La Salle saw that if the brothers persevered, through faith, in discovering the Spirit in the existential events of their lives, they would succeed in accomplishing God's work.

The chapter continues by stating that the brother remains faithful to the Spirit, first, by putting everything "in the view of God" and, second, by applying himself to the work of instructing children "with an ardent zeal." By connecting these two thoughts, De La Salle makes it clear that it is impossible to separate the search for the Spirit and the love for human beings. A teacher shares in God's love for humanity by abandoning himself or herself to God in the work that one does with children. In committing himself or herself to the education of children with an ardent zeal, persons discover the Spirit of God in their life. Love of neighbor and attention to the Spirit in active service encapsulate the creative response and the persuasive word of De La Salle's life.

## The Creative Response of De La Salle: The Meditations for the Time of Retreat

The *Meditations for the Time of Retreat (MTR)* represent the summit from which De La Salle was able to view for the first time the full extent of God's work which he had undertaken, long before, when he began his first associations with the brothers in community. In the MTR, De La Salle spoke to an established community of men that fulfilled a unique and novel role within the church. The creativeness of that role in the church is discernible in the language that De La Salle uses to describe the work of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. The Founder uses traditional, clerical language of the Counter-Reformation to describe his brothers, and he assigns tasks to his brothers that were normally reserved for the clergy. De La Salle's use of the words *ministry* and *minister* in the MTR is a clear example.

In the *MTR*, De La Salle absorbs the terms *ministry* and *minister* from St. Paul's letters and makes them his own. The word *ministry* is used 26 times and *minister* is used 11 times. De La Salle uses these words twenty-one more times than St. Paul. Clearly, the Founder viewed the work of his brothers as a genuine ministry within the church. But what was so radical about defining the brothers as ministers?

If we recall, the church of the Counter-Reformation was seeking to reassert itself in a world changed by the Reformers. It did so by institutionalizing the role of the priest as the minister of grace. The purpose of life was to "save one's soul," and the priest was there to show you how to do it. The care of the soul tended to be reduced to providing sacraments. This teaching was first promulgated by the 4th Lateran Council in 1215 and restated at the Council of Trent in 1565. De La Salle, a doctor of theology, was certainly familiar with these conciliar decrees, and yet he speaks of those who teach the young as "cooperators with Jesus Christ in the Saving of Souls." (title, *MTR 3*) Not only did De La Salle expand the definition of minister to non-clerics, but he extended the action of "caring for souls" beyond the sacraments to include the education of youth: "the care to instruct youth is one of the most important functions in the Church." (title, *MTR 7*) Even more, as Elizabeth Rapley points out in *The Devotes*, in the church of the Counter Reformation, education of youth, especially the catechizing of youth, was limited to the clergy. Rapley goes on, "All catechizing by laity was contrary to the spirit of Catholic pastoral reform. According to the Council of Trent and succeeding councils in France, the instruction of the people in the faith was the prerogative of the parish clergy. Where priests were unavailable, clerks in minor orders could act as substitutes. Laymen were admitted to catechize only where necessary. "

De La Salle also spoke of all Christian teachers as "ambassadors and ministers of Jesus Christ," as "sharing in the ministry of the holy apostles," and as "taking [Jesus'] place as the Good Shepherd of the gospel seeking the lost sheep." All of these phrases were traditionally applied only to priests. As Michel Sauvage states in the first volume of the *Cahier Lasalliens*, "we must not minimize the importance of such declarations from the pen of the Founder of the brothers. He knows well that the bishops are the successors of the apos-

les. And yet he does not hesitate to apply this expression to the brothers." While De La Salle remained devoted to the church, especially to the pope, his commitment did not prevent him from responding to the movement of the Spirit in the existential events of his life. De La Salle, in his free response, was willing to add to the accepted forms and structures of ministry in the church of his time.

As in the time of De La Salle, the understanding of ministry and religious life in the church has undergone a monumental shift in the past twenty-five years. What has emerged is a new emphasis on the person as a free and developing subject, traveling on a spiritual journey with others in a community, seeking God in a world that is good, responding freely to the gospel call of self-emptying wholeness. This shift in understanding is just the prologue to the real transformation that will take place in the lived reality of ministry in the world of the next millennium. The massive social, economic and political forces at work in the culture stand poised against each other: democratic leadership versus totalitarian oppression, economic and social justice versus materialism and pervasive violence, global awareness versus excessive individualism, pluralism versus ethnocentrism, and feminism versus sexism. The horizon from which we view the world is completely new.

Ministerial expansion and the rebuilding of religious life in this setting are inevitable. New forms will emerge in response to critical and unmet needs brought to light by the Spirit of God. Stagnant forms of religious life will be pushed to the margin of our post-modern society, or disappear completely, as the current transition unfolds. De La Salle's attention to the Spirit and steadfast faith in God enabled him to respond effectively in a very similar cultural and ecclesial transition. It is now the time to search our own shared experience for the movement of the Spirit, and to respond decisively and creatively to the unmet needs of young people and the poor brought to light by our Lasallian charism, steadfast faith in God and attention to the Spirit.

Whatever the future of religious life, the kingdom of God remains the end point, and our choices today, in the daily, existential events of our lives, are the means to that end. The document on *Shared Mission* from the 42nd General Chapter states that "in every culture and every religion there can be found the *seeds of the Word of God and the power of the Spirit of God.*" (3.1) De La Salle was such a seed in the church of 17th century France, as was the new community that gathered around De La Salle. Today and in the next millennium, the Brothers of the Christian Schools, in a shared mission with the whole Lasallian Family, can be a crystallizing seed that makes God's kingdom present in the world.

What will religious life, the Christian Brothers, or lay ministry look like in the future? Who can say? But the vision that we create for the future is less important than the daily risks that we take in response to the challenges and decisions we face today. Our first step into the future involves taking the time "for our souls to catch up with our bodies," being attentive to the Spirit, and holding firm to our faith in God. Who knows what the second step will be? •