

## JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE: A PROPHET FOR THE CHURCH

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Prophets are people who have received, as a gift from God, a vision of the future development of salvation. They are a sign of God as life for the church and the world. This article reflects on prophets in general and the spirituality of John Baptist de La Salle (1651-1719), in particular. De La Salle established the religious community known as the Brothers of the Christian Schools, or the De La Salle Christian Brothers. De La Salle responded prophetically to the educational needs of his time. His religious mission of providing quality education to poor young people is still valid today.

### Prophets are visionary people

According to biblical tradition, prophets are life-giving people because their vision is rooted deeply in God's plan of salvation. A prophet's vision is not knowledge of the future in a purely intellectual manner. Rather, it is a gift that enables her or him to look carefully at the action of God in the present, and to recognize the paths God is preparing for the future. Prophets are women and men called by God to prepare these new paths and reveal them to others. Through prophets God bursts into history.

By recognizing God's action and cooperating with God, prophets enable God's vision to become real and thus a part of history. Prophets are, therefore, people that God powerfully affects in the present so that the prophets' vision shapes the future. For this reason, prophets have creative personalities and are forgers of history and fountains of life for their own time and that of future generations. All prophets receive these gifts: recognizing God's plan, identifying themselves totally with God, and sharing these experiences with others.

### Prophets are signs of the God of Life

Neither the message nor the mission that flows from prophets' vision is communicated solely by words. Instead, prophets become a living prophecy, a kind of incarnated word of God for the men and women of their time. Their very life appears as a pronouncement and long-awaited realization of their vision, and as a vital sign of the mission entrusted to them by God.

Certain individuals and communities share in the charisma of the prophets and thereby help them fulfill their mission. This is the case of the disciples of prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures and of the religious communities founded by people who later became saints in the church. Communities and prophets together constitute the same vital sign as they live out both the vision and the mission.

Prophets are instruments of God's universal plan of salvation. A prophetic people are born when they receive a message proclaimed by a prophet and participate in that prophet's mission. Prophets and their disciples are transformed into the same sign—an instrument of God in the world. Together they form a vital unity, a divine message lived expectantly.

When God gives a prophet the gift of a small community—one that is immersed in the prophet's vision and united with him or her—this prophetic people becomes, in miniature, a sign of God's message for all people. We cannot separate Abraham or Moses from Israel; Christ from the church; or Benedict of Nursia, Francis and Clare of Assisi, Ignatius of Loyola, Teresa of Avila, Dominic of Guzman, and countless other saints of the church from their respective peoples. The communities founded by them helped transform the world through the church, and in accordance with their founder's charisma.

### John Baptist de La Salle: A prophet for young people

John Baptist de La Salle, like many of us, followed the ordinary way of knowing and discerning God's will. He met people, saw their needs, felt compassion for them and, in his prayer life, asked God to inspire him with the Holy Spirit. De La Salle showed that living according to the Gospel in everyday life allows one to experience the love of God and leads to holiness.

Lasallian spirituality evolved from the religious experience that De La Salle came to articulate gradually. His meditations, letters, memoranda, and books of instruction responded to the problems of daily life and to the pastoral work of his community of Brothers, which was dedicated to the education of poor boys. De La Salle wanted the Brothers to see the hand of God in all aspects of daily life. That is why Lasallian spirituality is based on faith and apostolic zeal, surrender to Divine Providence, and discernment and action according to God's will. Faith occupies a central place in the spirituality of De La Salle. He continually urged his Brothers in the community to look at everything in the light of faith and to view the world as God had made it. De La Salle promoted the faith of his brothers through acts of prayer and meditation on the sacred Scriptures so that they would be guided by the Holy Spirit dwelling within them. With this spirit, the Brothers would feel enlivened and faithful to the mission they had received from God.

De La Salle knew that genuine faith always expresses itself in good works and courageous love. If people could trust Divine Providence, discern the will of God, and recognize the love that God has for each one of us, then apostolic zeal would pervade their every action. De La Salle turned his attention toward creating a lifestyle that would nurture and help the Brothers deepen their faith as expressed in apostolic zeal:

- \* He urged the Brothers to read the sacred Scriptures every day so that they might encounter Jesus, live in the presence of God, and act according to God's will.
- \* He insisted that the Brothers pray daily in an active way.
- \* He encouraged his Brothers to surrender themselves to Divine Providence.
- \* He motivated his community to respond to God's love and care, and to always do God's will by discerning what it is that God wants from each one of us.

### The legacy of John Baptist de La Salle

De La Salle knew how to listen to the cries of the poor in Reims, Paris, and throughout all of France. He recognized that poverty, ignorance, and oppression cause crime, sin, and destruction. Breaking the vicious cycle of poverty meant educating children of poor families so they could earn a decent living and develop the sense of dignity every human being should possess. De La Salle discerned that God was

entrusting him with this revolutionary mission: to provide quality education to the children of poor families.

Lasallian spirituality invites us to do the following:

- \* learn in a practical and simple way how to live our faith in everyday life;
- \* nurture our faith-life by praying, reading the sacred Scriptures, surrendering to God, and trusting in Divine Providence;
- \* look at our life and daily events through the eyes of God, discerning what God asks of us through the people and circumstances in which we live;
- \* respond generously to the call of God.

Adopting Lasallian spirituality will enable us to be prophets insofar as we acquire the vision of God for today and tomorrow; become signs of the God of life for today's young people; and help implement the plan of salvation in the neighborhood, city, and country in which we live. •

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