

**La Salle's**  
**«Women of Proven Worth» (Prv31:29)**  
**(1/2)**

**Brother Gregory Wright**

Perhaps one of the better remembered incidents in the life of John Baptist de La Salle is described thus by Maillefer: *«...He tried to hide from his family the danger he really was in as much as this was possible in the circumstances. He carried this to the point of refusing to allow Madame Moët de Brouillet, his grandmother, to visit him in his room, for she wished to see for herself how sick he really was. He had her wait in the parlor, and went to the trouble of going there to receive her. She reproached him for his excessive sensitivity in her regard, but speaking with all respect he pointed out to her that the rules of the house proscribed the entrance of women.»* (Maillefer, 1963, 55)

Blain's more lengthy account of this incident provides a number of additional details about what is supposed to have transpired on this occasion:

*«This first bout of illness was marked by an outstanding example of regularity given by the Servant of God. His grandmother...had always loved him tenderly...(and) 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 felt her title of grandmother gave her a right which might properly be refused to other women. ...And even if it was proper to exclude others from the sickroom, it did not seem right to extend this prohibition to a grandmother. However, by an order from her grandson she was stopped at the door of the parlor, and was requested to wait for him there. Then 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 any warmer welcome from her grandson 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...

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...he told her, *«...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 it is remembered that my own grandmother did not have the privilege of visiting me when I was sick, save in the parlor.»* The Servant of God then tried to make light of his illness, and conversed with his grandmother as he would have done had he been well. (Blain, 1986, Volume I, Book 2, 91-92)

A modern reader might react differently to this incident than Blain did. He might tend to agree more with Mme. Moët de Brouille than with her grandson, sharing her fe-

elings of both surprise and offense at how she was treated. At the same time he might find the Saint's explanation and justification of his conduct quite shallow and unconvincing. More important, a modern reader might think the Founder had a very negative, and even an unChristian, attitude toward women, joined to a deep rooted fear of and a great aversion for all that was in any way associated with them.

Unfortunately, and perhaps unfairly, some of the Founder's writings which show a significantly different and quite positive attitude toward women do not seem to be as well remembered, or maybe their contents are not that well known. First of these would be fourteen of his letters, which have survived in whole or in part, that La Salle wrote to various nuns and to one lay woman. These documents as well as some of their background material give a different picture of their author.

To begin with, La Salle seems to have been very popular, both as a person and a spiritual director, among women – nuns or others – who were interested in advancing in perfection. Various bishops in whose dioceses he lived and worked seemed to have shared the opinion these pious women had of him. They appointed him confessor and spiritual director of several groups of nuns, while he assumed the direction of at least one pious laywoman. In his capacity as spiritual director of these nuns, the bishops gave him very extensive faculties so that he could discharge this function as effectively as possible. (Circular 335: 263)

Some people who consider the surviving Lasallian letters to these pious women to be out of character, question their authenticity. However, careful reading and examination of their contents seems to indicate that they are real Lasallian documents. (264-65) And, as when writing to his religious sons, the Saint was at times very demanding of these women, challenging them to be all they could become. (*Letters*, 1988: #'s 109, 110, 113, 114, 115-118) But he also shows a great respect for those to whom he writes, (#'s 108, 110, 115-118) along with confidence they can and will successfully meet his challenge. (#'s 108-110, 114-118) At the same time, to counterbalance the incident involving his grandmother, in which she said he showed a lack of affection, indifference, and an absence of feeling for his family, there is the letter he wrote to his niece, Jeanne-Remiette de La Salle, also known as Sister Françoise of Saint Agnes, a member of the Congregation of Notre Dame, founded by St. Peter Fourier. Written in 1718 as his life was drawing to a close, it shows his holy affection for a relative as well as his own humility, obedience, and detachment, virtues which he challenged her also to practice. (# 131) For La Salle this letter is a very revealing document. But it is not unique in the way it showed his love and esteem for the one to whom it was addressed, characteristics found in all his correspondence to those he regarded and dealt with as «women of proven worth.» (Prv 31:29)

These letters, however, are not the only Lasallian writings of this type. A number of his Meditations on the Principal Feasts have the same tone and express similar sentiments in a more detailed and emphatic way. For in addition to nine meditations dealing almost exclusively with the position and virtues of the Most Blessed Virgin as well as her role in helping us achieve salvation, and some twelve which deal in part with her life and role in the Church, eleven other meditations treat of the lives and activities of various women saints. Among them are Biblical characters such as Mary Magdalen, (144) Anne, the Mother of Mary, (146) and Martha, (147) along with saints of the first Christian centuries such as Genevieve, (95) Monica, (122) and Catherine of Alexandria. (192) Members of royalty such as Margaret of Scotland (133) and Elizabeth of Hungary (190) were also included as well as religious such as Catherine of Siena, (118) Magdalen of Pazzi (130) and Theresa of Avila. (177) In addition, Monica, Margaret, Anne, and Elizabeth were presented as model wives and mothers while Catherine of Ale-

xandria, Theresa of Avila, and Catherine of Siena were signaled out for their great learning.

Finally, the last two along with Genevieve were portrayed as «activists» in the fullest and best sense of this term. Choosing these saints rather than a number of others to be the subjects of eleven of the 109 meditations in this collection was probably no accident. For these writings were composed for the use of «a group of disciples whose state of mind and level of education, as also the goal of their work among poor children were well known to him.» Through these writings he sought to share with them the spirit which inspired him, «the spirit of faith joined to an ardent zeal for the education of youth.» To do so, he tried continually to show them the example of those who had done «their daily work in union with God» and joined «apostolic activity with a life of prayer». Quite recently one of his religious sons described this as La Salle's «way of *mystic realism*.» (Jean-Guy Rodrigue, FSC, 1988, 28-29)

How La Salle composed these meditations also has some significance in regard to the point just made. These writings are at once original and not original. (28-29) They are not original since they were drawn from and at times largely based on a variety of texts now better known to us. Among these were Pierre de Ribadeneira's *Fleurs de la vie des Saints*, published in various French editions beginning in 1687, François Paris's *Martyrologe*, various editions of which appeared in the early 1690's, other lives of particular saints, as also the *Roman Breviary*, and of course the New Testament. (10-14, 16) Having selected what he considered a suitable source or sources, the Founder then presented the material in a manner designed to show how the saint in question exemplified the virtues or the conduct to which he wanted to call attention at this time. What made these writings original was the way in which La Salle adapted and often abridged his source so as to present what he considered suitable information on his chosen topic. This first section of each of the three points of a meditation was usually followed by a segment more original still and addressed directly to the Brothers. Essentially here he exhorted them to imitate the example which the life and activity of the saint gave them. (29-30) But the fact La Salle chose to compose meditations on some saints rather than others shows that he considered some individuals better models of the life his religious sons were called on to live. Therefore, these meditations show he appreciated the fact there were women as well as men saints who met this criteria, and what follows shows more specifically how he presented them as models for religious educators.

A characteristic shared by many of the saints La Salle proposed as models to his Brothers was love for and practice of prayer. Of Genevieve he wrote, «...she devoted herself entirely...to prayer...so that her whole life seemed to be one continuous meditation.» (95:1) In her turn Monica is described as having taken «...special delight in prayer...» and unceasingly reciting the prayers she knew. (122:1) Regarding Margaret of Scotland he wrote, «...She was so given to prayer...that this formed her chief occupation», (133:1) while for Elizabeth of Hungary prayer was «...her one pleasure.» (190:1) Finally, he asserted that Anne was given «the signal favor of being the mother of the Most Blessed Virgin...» because of «...her extraordinary application to prayer.» (146:2)

In the case of yet other of these saints the Founder stressed their love for and practice of mental prayer, meditation, or contemplation. Thus Magdalen of Pazzi «...devoted herself assiduously to mental prayer.» (130:1) Catherine of Alexandria for her part often meditated «...on the holy and sublime maxims contained in Holy Writ.» (192:2) while «...Theresa's chief occupation was continual and sublime contemplation in which her sole aim was to unite herself closely with Jesus Christ...» (177:3) In all of these instances, however, prayer of any sort was shown not as an end in itself, but as having an important role in the life of a woman who wanted to follow Jesus closely and be united with him.

So in his meditation on Genevieve, La Salle wrote, «...Prayer is of little avail unless it is supported by mortification. ...Genevieve joined the one with the other, ...» (95:2) However she is not the only one of these saints presented as a model of penance. Regarding Catherine of Siena he wrote, «...The saint showed herself quite content, and patiently submitted to all the trials this brought upon her...» (118:1) while Magdalen of Pazzi is described as «...manifesting her great love for God by suffering greatly for Him. Her most ardent desire was to imitate the life and Passion of Christ...» (130:3) In their turns, Elizabeth of Hungary is described as «very mortified,» (190:2) and Mary Magdalen as faithful to follow Jesus when he sent her trials as well as when he favored her with consolations. (144:2) And of Theresa he wrote: «...this saint had a great desire for suffering. Nor was she content with the mere desire. She put her aspirations to the test by practicing great austerities, and by imposing upon herself almost continual penance. God was pleased to second her ardent wish for suffering...» (177:2)

All things considered, many of these women are pictured as accepting and often taking upon themselves almost unbelievable penances and suffering. But again, as in their prayer life, this was not an end in itself for any of these saints. For they knew that only by acquiring «the spirit of penance» can one be a true Christian and a religious, (190:2) since «...it is impossible to be at one and the same time sensual and Christian.» (95:2) So anyone who wishes to follow Christ must master his senses. In brief then, the Founder's message to the Brothers is that, as in the case of these saints, penance and suffering are a necessary part of the Christian life.

For a variety of reasons many of these holy women could not live in solitude. Rather they found themselves involved in numerous everyday activities which brought them into frequent and regular contact with people of many types in a wide variety of different situations. Being involved in this way could very easily have become an obstacle to the union with God which they so ardently desired. As La Salle well knew, here their situation was very similar to that of the Brothers. So to encourage his disciples to cope successfully with this aspect of their lives, he called attention to the example given by these women and challenged his religious sons to imitate it as much as they could. In particular Anne and Mary Magdalen were presented as examples of saints who, having consecrated themselves to God, found ways to withdraw from human contact in order to achieve the union with God they desired. (146:3, 144:1)

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