

**Female presence in the life of
ST. JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE**
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Brother Carlos José Láinez Paz

In the Common Rule, St. John Baptist de La Salle wrote:

“If a person of the opposite sex visits and is speaking with one of the Brothers, even when the Brother Director is away, there should always be a Brother present who sees all that occurs during this time” (Chapter XIV, 6).

“When speaking with persons of the opposite sex there should always be a suitable distance maintained between the parties concerned and women should never be looked at directly” (Chapter XVIII/XIX, 9).

“They should only be spoken to with great reserve and in a way free from any type of familiarity or looseness” (Chapter XVIII/XIX, 10).

“The pleasant manner in which the mothers of students should be treated, so as not to offend them, in no way opposes this type of reserve. The conversation should be terminated with few words” (Chapter XVIII/XIX, 11).

“When the Brothers speak with persons in authority and even more so when speaking with members of the opposite sex, they should not look directly at their faces but they should be highly reserved with them” (Chapter XXI, 7).

In the Rule of the Brother Director, we read:

“Do not allow women or girls to enter the house. And do not talk to any female in the reception area except in the company of one of the Brothers” (19).

To Brother Gabriel Drolin he wrote: “Still, it is not right that you appealed to your sister” (Letter 23, 11). To Brother Robert he points out: “It is not right to shout at the mothers...” (Letter 39, 2). And he soothes the conscience of Brother Séverin when he writes: “There is no reason, my very dear Brother, for you to upset your conscience for having, as you say, slandered a woman who has died” (Letter 54,1).

This is what we have found written by De La Salle with respect to women but what were John Baptist’s relationships with women and how were they present in his life?

THE WOMEN IN HIS OWN FAMILY

HIS GRANDMOTHER PETRA:

Helped to sooth the infantile boredom of John Baptist by reading pious books to him. (BD 11; 1B 118-119, 120; 2B 237).

She was the baptismal godmother of John Baptist (Galle-

go, S. p. 31, vol. I). She was part of the guardianship board (CL 26, 196; CL 34, 506; CL 41.1, 160).

The wedding banquet for Mary De La Salle was held in her house (Maillefer, J. Mémoires, 253).

She asked for an explanation as to why some low-class, uncouth teachers were frequenting the houses of John Baptist’s brothers. This seemed inappropriate to her (Gallego, S. John Baptist de La Salle - Biography - p. 150).

Before leaving for Paris, John Baptist bid farewell to her (BD 65, Gallego, S. - Biography, p. 209).

At the beginning of December, 1690, De La Salle’s health declines. When he arrived in Rheims from Paris he had to stay in bed due to illness. His biographers recall the episode of the visit of the grandmother Pietra.

Having just found out that he was in Rheims and was ill, she went to visit him. She was 75 years old at the time. John Baptist had her stay in the reception area and came down to see her. The grandmother understood but let it be known that she thought it was odd since she could have gone up to his room. De La Salle alluded to the idea of giving good example to the Brothers since he considered this a rather strong point in the Rule of the nascent congregation. (Gallego, S. - Biography, p. 233).

Grandmother Pietra and his other relatives “did not overlook anything that in all kindness suggested to them towards contributing to his cure” (MC 57; MR 84).

On October 7, 1691, one day before opening the Vaugiard novitiate, his beloved grandmother Pietra passed away in Rheims. The godmother of John Baptist, who on so many occasions from infancy onwards had understood him, encouraged him and prayed for him (Gallego, S. - Biography, p. 244).

In 1691 John Baptist received a portion of his grandmother Pietra’s estate (CL 26, 144, line 13 in the document).

MARY DE LA SALLE

She was born on February 26, 1654 (CL 27, 6-7; CL 41.1, 111-112).

She was fluent in Latin and Greek and she also sang and played the lute. She also did needlework, knitting and she was a good cook (Gallego, S. pp. 35-42).

She was the godmother of her brother Peter (CL 27 142-143; CL 41.1, 146).

When she was just 17 she took charge of her siblings due to the death of her mother. Her siblings respected her authority.

At the age of 18 she organized the funeral arrangements of her father (CL 29, 116s). She was part of the Guardianship Council. (CL 28-3, Guardianship Record).

John Baptist did not have charge of her but he cared for and administered her temporal goods (Gallego, S. Biography, p. 86).

On June 23, 1672 the common life of the six siblings ended as Mary and John Remegius went to live in grandmother Petra’s house. (Gallego S. Biography, p. 83). The established pension of 200 livres was paid annually to grandmother Petra. In addition to John Baptist she took care of all their needs because she was aware that she was the one responsible. Besides giving them money “as agreed” she paid for several pairs of shoes, a long dress, silk lining, black taffeta, cloth for a black dress or for embroidering handkerchiefs, and clothing in general. In the Guardianship

Records, the total expenditure for Mary exceeded 325 livres (Gallego, S. Biography, p. 100).

The two brothers saw each other frequently, at least once per week, and they preferred Thursdays and Saturdays (C.T. sheets 127-141).

In 1680 James Joseph pronounces his first vows as an Augustinian. As part of the ceremony he renounces all his temporal goods and these are to be divided among all the siblings. Mary believes that a good sum of money should be given to the Augustinian convent in Paris "as compensation". John Baptist agrees but he is no longer the guardian. Nicholas Lespagnol says no that 1500 livres is too much money. Mary gathers the six family members together, convinces them and together they go to the tribunal in Tambor street. The decision was that the guardian must pay 1500 livres to the St. Genevieve monastery in Paris. (CL 32 135-141).

On March 20, 1679 Mary marries her cousin John Maillefer. Among the official witnesses is John Baptist and he signs his name in the matrimonial certificate (CL 27, 10-12).

Mary died on March 23, 1711 in Rheims. She was the mother of three priests and a model Christian woman. She was sick for only two hours during her life and eventually succumbed to a stroke. Her husband wrote: "I have lost everything since I have lost a wife who was perfect in all kinds of ways" (Gallego, S. Biography, p. 465).

ROSE MARY

She was born on February 29, 1656 (CL 27,41 and CL 41.1, 116).

At times they would affectionately call her "Rosette" at home, at least John Baptist refers to her by this name two times in his account books (Cf. CL 28, sheet 6).

At the age of fifteen years, eight months, she entered the Augustinian convent of St. Stephen's for Women (Gallego, S. I, p. 81).

On August 6, 1672 John Baptist gives the sum of 100 livres for half the year's pension for his sister Rose de La Salle.

Rose Mary's dowry was set at 7000 livres (about 14 million pesetas or over \$100,000). John Baptist paid this in three installments: 2,000 livres on July 6, 1672 (CL 29, sheets 61-62); 1,000 livres on December 21, 1672 (ibid., sheet 70ff); the last 2,00 he paid on February 6, 1673 (ibid., sheet 72ff). The first 2,000 livres were paid by his father Luis de La Salle.

In addition to the dowry John Baptist paid the annual pension to the convent: 200 livres per year; 100 livres each semester. He obtained permission for the family council to assign a fixed pension for life, which action would greatly benefit the convent where Rose Mary was residing. But in reality he was the first to benefit from his father's estate: 7,000 livres in form of dowry, 200 for pension and 30 for a fixed rent, which would be a seventh of the estate and which he would receive when he became of legal age (Gallego, S. I, p.99).

As an older brother John Baptist frequently visited her in the convent. And during each visit, Rosette was the object of special gifts. In the accounting sheet for guardianship it is recorded that De La Salle gave her a knife case, thread,

currants, two jars of preserves, sugar, oranges from Portugal, pie crusts, small baskets, all necessary items for the abbess' Christmas box, a candle, a piece of skirting for the bed, a writing desk, a pair of woolen stockings and an iron bed heater...everything that was necessary for his sister who was a Sister.

In 1675 "four religious of St. Stephen's" were at the point of death, among them Rose Mary de La Salle, on account of medicine taken three days prior. It is believed that the cause was a poor quality senna (a type of medicinal herb). One can only imagine the distress of John Baptist and the entire family (Gallego, S., I, pp. 105-106).

On March 21, 1681, Rosette, the favorite of John Baptist, died in the Lord, after some ten hours with a rare disease. This was one of John Baptist's greatest losses. Rosette was 25 years old at the time of death (Gallego, S., I, p. 146).

JEAN-REMIETTE DE LA SALLE

The niece of Saint John Baptist de La Salle.

Daughter of Pierre de La Salle, the Founder's brother.

She was sent to the boarding school of the Sisters of Notre Dame which was founded by Saint Peter Fourier. When she showed a willingness to consecrate herself to God, her parents doubted that she was sincere but in the end they allowed her to follow her vocation.

She was admitted into the novitiate at the age of 17 on May 22, 1716; she took the religious habit on June 8, 1717 and she made her profession on June 13, 1718.

The following letter was written to her by John Baptist on the occasion of her religious profession.

To his niece who was a religious Sister: (1718)

My very dear Niece: On Ascension Thursday I answered the letter that you kindly sent me but, as it may not have reached you, I am writing a second time.

I am very grateful to you for letting me know the date of your religious profession and share with you your joy and your ardent desire to consecrate yourself entirely to God. It will win for you in this life a foretaste of life eternal.

How fortunate I think you are in separating yourself from the cares and anxieties of the world!

I will not fail to unite myself with you in prayer to ask God to give you the grace to make this sacrifice wholeheartedly.

I would very much like to be present at your profession, but I am prevented for two reasons. The first is that I am the only priest here to hear the confessions of 50 people, and it is difficult to get another for this community which is far from the town. So, I can't abandon them just now. The second is that, since I have a Superior, I am not my own master.

So, I ask you, please be satisfied that I join with you in this holy action in the same dispositions as those with which, by God's grace, you will make your profession.

With my best regards and all my affection...

This edifying and fatherly letter also shows the characteristic trait of familial affection that De La Salle had for his niece who was a religious Sister. •