

**FEMALE PRESENCE  
IN THE LIFE OF  
SAINT JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE  
II  
Relationships with female religious  
from various Congregations (1/2)**

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John Baptist de La Salle was familiar with the following congregations, all of which were devoted to teaching the poor:

- the Daughters of Christian Unity, of the Le Vachet abbey in Paris (1661);
- the Daughters of the Cross, founded by Ms. Villeneuve, which Nyel brought to Rouen as aids to the Black Ladies;
- the Daughters of St. Genevieve, in Paris, founded by Ms. Blosset and which were absorbed into the Daughters of the Holy Family (founded by Ms. Miramion);
- the Gray Sisters of Rouen, founded by Ms. Houdemare;
- the Lady Regents of Chalons-sur-Marne, who were the inspiration of Bishop Felix de Vialat (1664);
- the secular Ladies of Providence who were organized in 1679 by Ms. Morel in Charleville (Gallego, S. I, p. 191).

In the Congregation of Notre Dame, introduced in Rheims by Pierre Dozet (1637) several of De La Salle's relatives and some of Maillefer's entered as religious.

The Canonesses of St. Augustine, the order that Rose Mary de La Salle entered. For the abbey's Christmas box, De La Salle gave 41 livres, 8 salaries (sheet 121ff), the price of the gift that he made to Rosette (Gallego, I., p.99).

John Baptist moved the novitiate from the Grand'Maison to the suburb of St. Anthony. Across from the novitiate was the convent of the Dominicans of the Cross. He used to celebrate Mass there since there was no chapel in the novitiate. These Sisters immediately noticed something very special about the celebrant and they did not hesitate to ask him for spiritual direction. At first he hesitated to provide this service but he finally had to accept since this was a way to compensate the Sisters for the use of their chapel. (Gallego, S. I, pp.371-372). Several letters or fragments thereof have reached us by means of the biographers (Felix-Paul, Letters of Saint John Baptist de La Salle, p. 422).

A few meters away from the suburban house in St. Anthony were the Daughters of St. Margaret who used to help the diocesan vicar in the teaching of girls (Gallego, S. I., p. 371).

At first sight, a reading of the letters of Saint John Baptist de La Salle written to female religious might seem disjointed if they are compared with those written to the Brothers. While the letters written to the Brothers are in a very direct and clear style, the ones addressed to female religious have sentences that are very carefully constructed that are filled with precise explanations. The ideas are expressed in a very logical fashion and it seems that we are dealing with a different temperament and a different author.

This is proof of the correct judgment of a priest who is very human and sensitive to the influence of grace and who can adapt to the spiritual and psychological needs of those under his direction. (Felix-Paul, the letters of Saint John Baptist de La Salle, p. 423).

Letter 106.

***To a Member of a Religious Community of Women***

You should be guided in what you do by your rules, not by the example of those who transgress them. If you have read thoroughly the work of the Abbot of La Trappe, you surely have realized that it is not singularity to observe your rules in a community in which several others do not do so. Let people think what they wish of you, and do not be troubled, provided that you are doing what you ought.

Be zealous against your faults and for your own advancement, and if you wish to show zeal for others, let it be simply by giving them good example.

Look upon yourself as a novice and act as a fervent novice in the matter of faithful observance of the Rule. How carefully and with what loving ardor she follows the rules in the smallest detail and watches over herself so as not to omit even one of them. This is what you should be like and perhaps you are not. Think about this, I beg you.

Slackness and rationalizing will lead you into many faults. From now on, look on your rules as an explanation and an application of what is contained in the Gospels. Observe them as such. The spirit of faith will lead you to give practical application to this frame of mind.

Just as you must not easily follow all your impulses to do something good nor lightly take them to be inspirations from God, so you must have a great aversion for those that lead to laxity. For those you should even have a holy abhorrence, and with regard to impulses of both kinds you must take advice before coming to any decision. But if you do not have the time or the opportunity for this, and it is a question of something to be done or not done on the spur of the moment, you must ask God's help. Then with resolution, courage, and singleness of heart, do what you think would be in accordance with the advice you would get under similar circumstances. Natural repugnance for a course of action should induce you to follow it, rather than abandon it.

In all matters concerning the observance of your rules, I advise you to act as being in the presence of God and not to please others, because you know that to take pains that others have nothing to reproach you with and not to be concerned about God is to act as a Pharisee, a hypocrite, and not as a Christian.

In a word, dear Sister, keep to your rules and your daily regulations. Look upon both as being of primary importance for you. That will be better for you than working miracles. Above all, out of love for God, be all the more exact in carrying out what is most opposed to human nature and causes you the most pain rather than what pleases you most.

I am glad that your health permits you to follow the community exercises. That is what you must cling to and what I most want of you because it is an excellent means of making yourself pleasing to God, in whose love I am....

Letter 108.

***To a Member of a Religious Community of Women***

Throw yourself into the arms of God and of his Holy Mother and you will be supported in your great weakness, not by means of sensible consolations, but as God wills it and you yourself merit it. The violence that you have to do to yourself will not always be so great nor will it last so long, for on his part God will bring you relief, and on your part you will not have so long to live. But even if it should go on and on, do not your sins deserve it, and does not the example of Jesus Christ demand it, and are not the love of God and the possession of eternal happiness worth it?

Confide all your failings to Jesus Christ and trust in his goodness. He will not let you be overcome by your distress if you do not give him cause through your infidelity. So be patient and wait; consolation will come in good time.

All the trouble and anxiety you experience afford you good opportunities for making satisfaction to God for your past life. Be faithful in this and remember that you will give an exact account of the use you have made of these opportunities. Always cling, I beg you, to the Cross of Jesus Christ and never separate yourself from it. In the face of all the threats of the devil, boldly say that you will never leave it, nor will anything separate you from it. If you make this generous resolve, Our Lord will at once come to your help and support you in his hands.

Let us accept our wretchedness joyfully, since our God is always in his eternal happiness. That should calm our anxieties. Let us live through our wretched life as long as it pleases God, without complaining to anyone, not even to him who can free us from it. Let us seek only his will. I admit that the continual violence you have to do to yourself is most disagreeable to human nature, but ought we not suffer in order to win back the paradise we have lost and to avoid the hell we deserve? Everything must be seen in relation to these two great eternal truths. Let God be your sole recourse in your struggles against human nature and your dejection, and let your visits to the Blessed Sacrament be your only remedy for your distress.

If your present state of mind is a martyrdom, it is the best thing you could wish for, because it is most profitable for your sanctification. Even if your submission to God's will in your sufferings is only minimal, it is enough. What you must avoid is revealing your feelings to others, except those who direct you. Be careful of that.

I realize, my dear Sister, that you are in great suffering and I deeply share in your difficulties; but you should not, it seems to me, grieve so much. Your feelings of abandonment touch only the exterior. The profound darkness which you experience is the means that God gives to draw you more surely to himself. You know quite well that the more darkness and doubt you experience in your life, the more you will live by faith; and you know that it is faith alone which should motivate the lives and actions of those who belong to God. Often say to yourself from the depths of your desolation, "Even if I become a reprobate, I will do all that I can for God." And if out of 20 actions, there is only one that is good or even only partly good, still it will be so much done for love of God. Humble thoughts are sometimes good in your present state, but courage and confidence in God will serve you better. Once again I say, turn to God in prayer. Could doing this annoy him? Cast such a thought from your mind, dear Sister. I assure you that prayer always draws down some grace from God, even on the most hardened sinners. It is almost their only resort. And were you simply to remain in God's presence, that would still be a great help to you, supporting you in your troubles and helping you to bear them patiently. As often as possible your prayer in the presence of the Most Blessed Sacrament. This will help very much to bring peace of mind and tranquility to the depths of your soul.

Never let yourself be wrongly persuaded that God has abandoned you. On the contrary, be sure that God is more ready than ever to welcome you into his arms, and that as your distress increases so does his mercy towards you increase and abound. He knows just how weak you are and how needed his grace is to establish and strengthen in you what your weakness and laxity put you in danger of losing at every moment....

Letter 109.

*To a Member of a Religious Community of Women*

You must be convinced that your vocation demands of you quite a different degree of humility and quite a different renunciation of the world and its spirit, and even of yourself,

so that what would be tolerated in another person should not seem tolerable in you at all.

Looking on yourself as the lowest of creatures, you should place yourself beneath everyone else and be astounded that anyone can put up with you and that the earth is willing to bear you on it.

See how far you are from having such sentiments and be ashamed that you know yourself so little. Ask Our Lord to engrave this humility deep in your heart.

You cannot go too far in humbling yourself, in self-contempt and self-abasement, for this is the only way to salvation that is left to you.

If you wish to make great progress in the practice of this virtue, carry out the following directions:

No matter what the source of the humiliation, accept it as what you deserve.

Wait for humiliations to come, unless God gives you a special inclination to seek them out and the occasion presents itself naturally.

Dear Sister, look on everything that happens as good, especially when it humbles you and is most opposed to your natural inclinations. There is no better way of destroying your deep-seated pride than the acceptance each day of humiliations. If you want them and love them because you wish to be completely united with Our Lord, he will provide you with ample opportunity in addition to those already furnished by your self-will and your poor disposition. If you have such a hunger for humiliations and separation from the world, with the grace of Our Lord, you will succeed.

Your opinion of yourself should always be a lowly one. Humble yourself in everything and in regard to everyone. Humble yourself when you cause suffering to others, considering that this is all you are capable of; and when you find others criticizing what you do, be convinced that they are right.

It is good for you to be discredited in the eyes of others so that you may become more withdrawn from the world, opposed to its ways, and more closely united to God.

When reproved for some fault you have not committed or when rebuffed, thank those who do this with the same gentleness and humility as if they were doing you a favor. At the same time show that you are willing to correct yourself. You are well aware that you deserve no respect, no deference, not even any approval at all. You do not deserve that anyone should even listen to you. Let that be your frame of mind.

Always take the lowest and most inconvenient place, in spite of any repugnance you may feel, for this repugnance springs from your pride. It will always be much to your profit to be treated as the servant of the others and you should eagerly desire this: 1. to destroy your pride; 2. to overcome your laxity; and 3. to acknowledge that your sins are so many and so great, and should place you at the feet of everyone, especially of your Sisters. When you come to realize that you deserve nothing but contempt in the eyes of God and look on all created things as the instruments that in his mercy and justice he uses now to raise you up, now to humble you, and that Divine Providence makes use of them only for your salvation and his glory, you will be little affected by the harsh treatment that may be dealt you.

Keep yourself always in your proper place, that is to say, beneath the feet of the demons themselves, for that is where you have so often deserved to be and where perhaps you could still be forever. In this frame of mind, take your place beneath your Sisters without expecting others to show you any consideration or to treat you with any respect. You must be convinced that there is none who is not more virtuous and more spiritual than you. They could hardly be less so without putting at risk their eternal salvation as you have so often done. If, my dear Sister, you can engrave these sentiments on your heart and live by them, loving abjection, contempt, and the rebuffs of others seeking them and embracing them as being what you deserve, I think that you will have found an efficacious means, perhaps the only means, of drawing down God's mercy on yourself....

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