

Toward the Christian Education of the Poor The contribution of Canon Jean-Louis de La Salle (1/2)

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Years ago a relatively brief article in a popular magazine attracted my attention because of its catchy title, *Who Has ever Heard of Whistler's Father?* It began by saying few would contest that Mrs. Whistler was well known because of the famous portrait painted by her son which is usually given the incorrect title *Whistler's Mother*. Then it said that the artist's father, an early graduate of the United States Military Academy at West Point, deserved to be better remembered because of a number of significant achievements such as his railroad building in then czarist Russia. It concluded by saying that only an untimely death cut short a promising career which could have made him quite famous. Often I have recalled this brief article, not because of its profound ideas, but because it made an interesting point. Are there not people who have a number of achievements to their credit — some of which might have affected me personally — who have been forgotten? And to become more specific, for me as a Brother of the Christian Schools, might not Canon Jean-Louis de La Salle, a younger brother of the Founder, be such an individual? A brief account of some of the more significant events of his life and his involvement in the work of his older brother might help answer this question.

In spite of the frequently quoted statement of Blain (I, 118) that Jean-Baptiste was the eldest of seven children — five boys and two girls, Louis and Nicole Moet de La Salle had eleven children — eight boys and three girls. However, four of them died quite young or in their infancy, and Blain might have been referring only to the children who survived and reached adulthood. One who died at an early age was a first Jean-Louis, born on 15 February 1663, but who lived for only ten months. Thus the Jean-Louis closely associated with the Founder was the second member of the family to be given this name. Born on Christmas Day 1664, he lived almost to the age of 60, dying on 26 September 1724. Baptized on the day of his birth, his eldest brother served as his godfather and thus began a close relationship that lasted almost until the death of the Founder (Aroz, CL 26: 154, 166, 279-90; CL 27: 65-66, 78). In time Jean-Louis was one of four of the seven surviving children to enter the priesthood or the religious life, becoming a diocesan priest and a canon of Reims like his godfather (Blain: I, 118). But prior to that time tragedy entered his life. Not yet seven years old when his mother died in 1671, he lost his father in 1672 well before his eighth birthday (Aroz, CL 26: 165-66). After these events, though, he did receive much love and support from his grandmother during the rest of her life. Also, he enjoyed a close relationship with Jean-Baptiste who was always very solicitous for his godson (Aroz, CL 26: 154; CL 27: 78).

Like his godfather, after he had received his first instruction at home from a private tutor, Jean-Louis began his schooling at the College des Bons Enfants (Aroz, CL 27: 78). Then, after 1672 he was one of the three somewhat

older boys who remained in the family home with Jean-Baptiste, during which time the latter took care to see that they led an orderly and regular life (Blain: I, 135, 143, 172). Much attached to and greatly influenced by his older brother, possibly it was at this time that Jean-Louis decided to imitate him by entering the clerical state (Aroz, CL 27: 78-79; Blain: II, 477). Not yet that advanced in his studies, though, Jean-Louis was still in the family home when a major crisis arose. It resulted from Jean-Baptiste's decision to bring the schoolmasters with whom he was associated into his house. The elder brother did not want to force his siblings to remain with him and have to associate with the masters if they did not wish to do so. However, while Pierre and Simon went elsewhere, Jean-Louis decided to remain in spite of the changed situation, following the rule given to the masters and sharing their diet (Bernard: 43; Blain: I, 172, 176, 226). During these early years of Jean-Baptiste's involvement with the schools, Jean-Louis is said to have gone to Guise with Adrien Nyel who went there to open a new school. According to the original draft of Bernard's biography of the Founder, Jean-Louis is supposed to have taught a class at a time when there was a shortage or teachers for this school (67). However, when asked to check the accuracy of this manuscript, then Canon de La Salle deleted this statement from the account. At the same time, though, he did not delete a statement which said he had taught in one of Jean-Baptiste's schools in Paris. So it seems safe to say that the statement about his activity in Guise was inaccurate (Aroz, CL 27: 81-83; Bernard: 67).

This phase of Jean-Louis's relations with the Founder ended in 1682 when he followed his older brother's example and entered the Seminary of Saint-Sulpice where he remained for most of the time until 1689 (Aroz, CL 27: 79-81, 103). So he was in Paris when M. Compagnon and then M. Baudrand began the negotiations which eventually led Jean-Baptiste and two Brothers to come there to open a school in the parish of Saint-Sulpice. Though he was involved in these negotiations, his precise role in them is not that clear (Aroz, CL 27: 104; Blain: I, 286; Maillefer, 1723: 46). Prior to this event, Jean-Baptiste had been in Paris in connection with the resignation of his canonry, and most probably the brothers had met at that time (Aroz, CL 27: 103). And once Jean-Baptiste moved to Paris it also seems possible that his younger brother lived with him even while continuing his studies at the seminary. For Jean-Louis has been mentioned as having spent some time in a Brothers community, possibly the one on rue Princesse. Likewise he seems to have been present when during one of the Founder's first serious illnesses M. Baudrand brought him Viaticum. This was prior to the Founder being cured through the efforts of the famous Dr. Helvetius (Aroz, CL 27: 78, 105). However, Jean-Louis's stay in Paris came to an end after his ordination on 30 April 1689, and when he received his doctorate in theology from the Sorbonne on 19 October 1693 (Aroz, CL 27: 80).

Very soon after completing his studies at the Sorbonne, Jean-Louis returned to his native city to begin an active career which lasted until his death on 26 September 1724. To begin with, Msgr. Le Tellier appointed him a professor in the diocesan seminary. Displaying great zeal in this position, he distinguished himself by among other things the way he kept up-to-date in his field. Also, quickly he gained a reputation for the high quality of his sermons while he was noted for being a good and pious priest. Possibly during these years he lived with his sister Marie and her husband Jean Maillefer (Aroz, CL 27: 80-81; Maillefer, 1723: 32). But it was not long before his Archbishop recognized his academic and other achievements in what this prelate considered a most appropriate way.

Perhaps the first time Jean-Louis figured in a big way in the life of Jean-Baptiste was when the latter — with permission from Le Tellier — prepared to resign his canon-

ry. Even Blain testifies that not just the members of the Cathedral Chapter but all of Reims wanted and expected Jean-Baptiste to resign this position in favor of his younger brother. All this pressure of course only evoked Jean-Baptiste's famous response that he would have passed this canonry on to his brother — if he was not my brother (Blain: I, 204; Bernard: 55; Maillefer, 1723: 32). Jean-Louis's response to this action and assertion of his brother is not known. However, scarcely a year after his return to Reims to begin his ministry there, without any efforts on his part to obtain such an appointment, Msgr. Le Tellier made him a member of the Cathedral Chapter. When a vacancy occurred in its ranks, Jean-Louis was given this position by an archbishop who said he was making up for the folly of the older brother (Aroz, CL 27: 84; Blain: I, 204; Bernard: 55). After this his career continued to flourish. He was put in charge of the minor seminary in Reims and also entrusted with the care of the Cathedral building. In time appointed senechal or agent in charge of the Cathedral Chapter, he represented his fellow canons in the Assembly of Clergy in which he ranked right after his archbishop and the vicar general of the diocese. Also, he helped build up the collection of the Reims city library. Finally, he was entrusted with auditing the accounts of the Cathedral Chapter as well as of several of the diocese's charitable works. Nor did he neglect intellectual activity for he composed various theological and spiritual works. While he was doing all these tasks his fellow canons praised him as a man of prayer who was very devoted to the work of the Church. Following the death of Msgr. Le Tellier, under the new archbishop Francois de Mailly he retained the many positions to which he had been appointed. And as late as 1719 he went to Paris to help resolve a conflict between this prelate and the city government (Aroz, CL 27: 84-85). The positions Jean-Louis attained and the success he enjoyed could lead one to ask what the career of his older brother might have been like if he had not chosen to devote his life and talents to the work of the Christian schools.

When reading about the actions of Jean-Baptiste as he assumed the care of his younger brothers and sisters following the death of their parents, it is easy to get the idea that Louis and Nicolle de La Salle had had a closely knit family (Blain: I, 135, 143, 172; Maillefer, 1723: 17). Jean-Louis definitely showed himself to be part of this group, both as one who profited from this situation and who contributed to maintain and develop it. For when in 1682 his brother Jacques Joseph became a Canon of St. Augustine, he left his portion of the family inheritance to be divided equally between Jean-Louis and his other three surviving brothers. Since prior to his ordination Jean-Louis had received his own share of the family estate, even before he began to receive the prebend from his canonry this young cleric was comfortably situated financially speaking (Aroz, CL 27: 53- 54, 197-200). As a result he was willing and able to help a relative of his mother, Jacques Moet, by advancing him money to purchase a vineyard. Also, with the pastor's permission he officiated at the marriage of his brother Pierre in February 1696. And when his sister Marie, wife of Jean Maillefer, died in March 1711, he was the one who signed her death certificate (Aroz, CL 27: 33-34; CL 40-I; 104-105). Present to his family, he was ready to provide help when it was needed as well as to share in its joys and sorrows. Thus his close relations with Jean-Baptiste were in no way unique.

But in many ways it was the tragedy of his youngest brother Jean-Remy, declared insane in 1717 and then confined to an institution, which showed his concern for his family and the practical bent it could take. Along with his brother Pierre he had opposed Jean-Remy's marriage to Magdeleine Bertin de Rocheret, and the two had absented themselves from this wedding (Aroz, CL 27: 165). But when their youngest brother could no longer discharge his duties as a husband and a father, his wife as well as their three surviving children became objects

of their concern. Along with Jean-Baptiste he helped pay Jean-Remy's living expenses, and when his oldest brother could no longer contribute, Jean-Louis assumed full responsibility in this matter. At the same time the canon helped ensure that the wife and children were given the financial help they so badly needed. Finally, in his last will and testament, he left his nephews a significant inheritance while taking steps to make sure no one would deprive them of this legacy (Aroz, CL 27: 67, 69-70, 158, 170, 172, 189-90). How he handled these matters, as well as how he made certain the assistance Jean-Baptiste wanted to give these unfortunate children was not diverted elsewhere, show him to have been a prudent business man and a competent man of affairs (Aroz, CL 39: 23, 89). He showed this talent also in his financial activities in connection with the emerging religious Institute founded by his oldest brother.

Since prior to 1724 this Institute did not have Letters patent and had no legal status, neither the group of Brothers nor any of their schools could lawfully own any property or receive any inheritances. However, because the Founder had determined that his Christian schools for poor boys would teach their students gratuitously, it was necessary for the group and each institution to have regular and assured sources of income to support the Brothers and ensure the continued functioning of the school. Frequently these needs were met when generous benefactors donated lands and/or buildings with the stipulation that the income from these gifts would provide the funds needed by the Brothers and the school. But since this endowment could not be given to the Institute or its schools, Jean-Baptiste would create a *societe civil* or group of trustee-benefactors to take legal possession of a school's source of support. For its part this group would ensure its permanence by choosing new members to replace any who died or resigned. After his definite return to his native city in 1693, Jean-Louis served as a member and perhaps the guiding spirit of several such groups in Reims or nearby towns (Aroz, CL 26: 264; CL 27: 106).

Without pretending to give a complete listing of Jean-Louis's activity of this type, it might be mentioned that at least by 10 March 1699 and continuing until 14 February 1719, Canon de La Salle served as his brother's agent in Reims. As indicated in the Archives of the Department of the Marne, his tasks included acquiring properties as sources of income to support the Christian schools in and around Reims. Possibly it was only on 11 September 1720 — more than a year after Jean-Baptiste's death — that his last action of this type took place. But because even if the Founder was a member of the *societes civils* involved, usually he was not in Reims, following the deaths of other original members of the *societes*, after 1716 Jean-Louis often acted alone while conducting these affairs. In doing so, though, he seems to have enjoyed the full confidence of his brother. One such specific action in which he was involved was taking possession of the portion of an inheritance left to Jean-Baptiste by Marguerite Bachelier (February 1700). Another was purchasing with his older brother a piece of land paid for by a donation of 800 livres given by Francois Lefebvre (June 1713). Other such activities included buying two houses, the rent from which would help support the Brothers (June 1701), and buying a house in connection with one of the Reims schools (August 1700) (Aroz, CL 26: 280, 297-98; CL 27: 106-108; CL 39: 75; CL 40-I: 112, 156-57, 174). At this point it might be good to recall the time Jean-Louis had to spend in choir as a canon, his duties as a seminary professor and later as the director of the minor seminary, as well as the demands imposed on him as a scholar, writer, and preacher. Thus some might say he was busy enough already — if not too busy. So his willingness to concern himself with the financial needs and the survival of the Brothers schools in Reims and other nearby towns shows he had a real interest in this work.

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