

DEPARTURES: 1671-1672

Brother John Deeney

On the left bank of the Seine in a populous part of Paris, the seminary of St. Sulpice was a large enough building to insulate its inhabitants from the noise and movement of the city. Dim, quiet corridors threaded the interior of the building. Outside a fine white dust descended with the summer heat as the stone masons worked on the new parish church.

It was towards the end of the morning and Monsieur Tronson was still at his desk. A large tome containing sermons of the Fathers of the Church was open on his desk and a half-filled sheet of paper lay in front of him. He had put down his quill pen for the moment and was reflecting on how to finish off his lecture to the seminarians, a harder task now, towards the end of this summer term. The gentle tap on the door brought his mind back to his surroundings. The person was that of John Baptist de La Salle, one of the group of seminarians he had undertaken to guide. The young man's normally happy expression was strained and he held a paper to his chest in an abnormally tight grip.

«Sir, I have received news this morning of the death of my mother »

With tact and sympathy, Monsieur Tronson talked his student through the painful trauma of the news. The closeness of mother and son was so evident that it brought tears to the older man's eyes as well. How fortunate at a time like this that the bedrock of faith was there for support against the shock.

«You must go to the chapel where it is quiet, and there give thanks to God for the holy life your mother lived and for the part which she played in leading you to Him. And when you pray for her soul, remember the infinite mercy of God who is Father to us all.»

When John Baptist had left, Tronson did not return to his lecture. He remembered the deaths of his own relatives. Age helped one to gain a perspective on death, he reflected, but how anyone could truly cope with death without the support of Christian belief surpassed his imagining. All the efforts, joys and hopes of life suddenly snuffed out, lost forever? He could not feel that human life could be so lacking in meaning. Especially when it came to the death of a loved parent. The memories of all that sympathy and love lavished on the children. The heartache of knowing that a mother's support was no longer there, that there would be no more occasions to show appreciation or return that love....

His eyes turned to the crucifix on his desk. The heartache of love, the need to trust in the Father - Jesus knew all that, through it he had transcended the darkness of death. Monsieur Tronson closed his eyes and prayed for John Baptist in his time of trial. Prayed that he would hope and trust in God wherever he might be led.

It was less than a year later that the news of the death of his father, Louis de La Salle reached John Baptist at the seminary of St. Sulpice in Paris. The death had come after a sudden, short illness that just gave Louis time to amend his will. His father had already been buried before the news reached Paris. The shock was again severe but this time there were evident consequences for John Baptist. At 20, he was now the oldest of the still large family and would have to become involved in their affairs in Rheims.

It was Holy Week when he received the heavy news from Rheims. The days of retreat at St. Sulpice were difficult for him as he signed off at the seminary and at the Sorbonne and prepared to leave the capital. He set off for Rheims after a subdued Easter and walked the 160 kilometres in five days. His mind must have churned over the situation during the hours of walking through the spring countryside and everything have appeared so different in these new circumstances. The strong call he had felt to become a priest and the intensely spiritual experience of St. Sulpice were suddenly under threat. It was not as if he had changed: things had changed around him and he felt half lost. What would lie in store for him at Rheims? What was God saying in all of this? Questions he could not answer, events he could not control.

The upset in his life was greater even than expected. His father had changed his will to appoint John Baptist as guardian of the children. There could be no doubt that his studies for the priesthood would have to be suspended indefinitely. His role would become that of father to most of the children and administrator of the family possessions. He would have the support of other older relatives to help him develop the skills he would need for this, but it would occupy the greater part of his time. After the ordered life of the seminary he would now have to develop his own pattern for living. Being free to choose, he would have to decide on priorities: balance his own inclinations and his duties as head of family and canon of the cathedral.

He regretted leaving the seminary. Later in life de La Salles's opinion of St. Sulpice was recorded: 'He always loved that training school of evangelical labourers and never spoke of it except with the warmest expressions of esteem and respect.' Having been plucked out of such a congenial environment, John Baptist seems to have suffered from an uncertainty about God's call to him. The path which had seemed so clear was encumbered by problems which he was incapable of removing. If God wanted him to be ordained, why these obstacles, the death of both parents and the acquisition of demanding responsibilities? The doubts were very real to him. Fr. Nicolas Roland writing, it is thought, to De La Salle says the following: "I am very sorry to hear of the state you are in... Do you not see that it is the devil who is trying to overwhelm you and that through these persistent temptations and fears that he sends you, he is trying to push you to leave the service of God?"

With the support of such spiritual men as Roland and through his own persistence in prayer and work for others, De La Salle found the strength and insight to cope with his

situation and at the same time to continue to grow in his understanding of God. In retrospect, he may have come to see that these two strands formed one line that, as he followed it, developed in him strengths and qualities which he would use constantly over the course of his life. Far from being abandoned, God was guiding him along a path of rich practical and spiritual experience, though it may not have felt like it at the time. He was to write later when he could see what had occurred: “God, who conducts all things with wisdom and gentleness ... (worked with me) in an almost imperceptible manner over a long period of time...”

FOR PRAYER AND REFLECTION LASALLIAN FAMILY.

- * As Christians, we turn to God in faith during those difficult moments in life. John Baptist de La Salle turned to God to seek an understanding of the turn of events in his life. In what difficult moments of your life have you turned to God in search of guidance? How has your faith sustained and guided you through difficult times?
- * De La Salle looked for support from spiritual men such as Roland to help him understand the movement of God in his life. Who do you look to for guidance and support? In your life, which people have helped you to see where God was calling you?
- * Through these difficult life events, De La Salle continued growing in his understanding of God. How has your understanding of God grown in recent years? How have your life experiences enabled you to grow in your understanding of God?
- * The death of his parents and the leaving of his priestly studies at St. Sulpice caused De La Salle to doubt his vocation to priestly service. We often become discouraged when obstacles appear in our path. How can doubts and obstacles help us to clarify our call by God to service?
- * We often have to live in acceptance of God’s will before we start to understand his purposes; events such as sickness, loss, or failure can easily lead us to question our faith. Select some event which has been difficult for you and pray for the grace to see it as being God’s will and as something from which the Lord can draw good even if we are unable to see that side of things.
- * It is easy to feel that we do not have the gifts which are required for the work to which the Lord has called us. In one sense that is true, and God likes us to be aware of our weaknesses and to rely on his strength. But it is also too easy to undervalue the talents with which God has gifted us. Write down some of the talents which you discern in yourself and thank God for them in your prayer. Some of the less obvious gifts, such as that of peacemaker, encourager, leader are some of the most important.
- * De La Salle had to leave the seminary to look after his younger brothers and sisters. This prepared him for dealing with young people later on in his life. Can you identify how your family life or education has contributed to your desire to be involved with young people?
- * In chapter 10 of the gospel of Mark, a blind beggar calls out to Jesus and the more people tell him to quieten down the more he shouts for attention. Jesus cures his blindness and says: «Go, your faith has saved you.»
One lesson from this incident is that if we want something badly enough we will have to keep on asking for it. Probably the more we ask the more we come to desire and value what we are asking for. If our work is something which requires a sense of vocation, this is something that we should continually ask for in our prayers instead of taking it for granted or as something given just once way back in our past.
- * The family of John Baptist de La Salle obviously encouraged his desire to become a priest. Nevertheless, he had to leave behind this family which he loved to go and study in Paris. A few years later on in his life he had an even more radical parting from the social milieu of his family and friends. Are there things which we have had to leave in order to follow God’s call? Was that a difficult process? Are there still things in our life which tie us down and that we ought to be trying to leave behind in order to be fully available to God?
- * “Glory be to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.” (Eph. 3:21.) •