

**OUT OF THE DEPTHS.  
1680**

**Brother John Deeney**

In winter the frozen winds from Siberia sometimes sweep across the Baltic sea, over the lowlands of Germany and Belgium and into the rolling countryside of Champagne in northern France. It is a wind which even today drives the people of northern Europe to find shelter from the chill and to cosset themselves until the cold abates. Such a wind as this was blowing one night in 1680, carrying flecks of snow that stung where they hit exposed hands or faces. There were few people outdoors on that particular evening and on one lonely road leading towards Rheims there was only the one traveller, John Baptist de La Salle, priest, cannon of Rheims cathedral and leader of a community of teachers working in the charity schools of the city.

The weather was unsuitable for travelling, but being on horseback and knowing the way, he anticipated little problem apart from the discomfort of the cold, an inconvenience with which he felt well able to cope. The wind buffeted both horse and rider. The horse kept its head down as it plodded steadily through the layer of snow, slipping occasionally on the frozen ruts. Its mane was already frosted with ice and the wind whipped the warm breath out of its nostrils. The rider had his hat pulled down and cloak turned up against the wind. He wrapped his cloak over his frozen hands where he grasped the reins. The evening closed in. Where black woods had earlier stood out against the white fields there was now just a dense, overall gloom. The snow was thicker too. The wind had totally effaced any earlier tracks and was piling the snow into drifts that loomed suddenly out of the dark.

The way became less certain but there was no question of stopping, no help, no shelter. The horse made its way around the edge of a large drift then suddenly lurched and snorted in fright. Its rear hoofs slipped on the edge of a steep slope and it bucked, pawing frantically to find a grip. Taken unawares, the rider slipped sideways. His numbed hands lost their grip on the reins and he tumbled off the horse and

down the slope just as the animal succeeded in regaining its footing. The snow cushioned his fall but the shock of icy water made him gasp. It wasn't deep. He scrambled to his feet as the thin ice crackled around him. He sank into soft mud and the water reached above his knees. The water was black around where he had fallen but there was little else to see apart from the snowbanks rearing into the darkness above him.

He had to climb out. His reaction was immediate, slowed only by the cold and the heaviness of his soaked clothes. But underneath the snow the slope was steep and slimy. His feet slipped back down into the water and his hands clawed at cold clay. He tried again. He broke more ice and moved along to a different spot. Everything was icy, nothing was solid. Freezing mud and ooze and soft snow. The cold in his legs and hands was biting into the bone. He could hardly grip any more. The slope was scoured now with muddy trails where he had failed to get out. He shouted until the effort and the cold hurt his lungs. The wind whipped the shouts away into the blackness.

He hitched his wet cloak up over his arms and back and tucked his hands against his chest. His feet were beyond help. His plight was desperate. He had done all he could. He, John Baptist de La Salle, not yet thirty years old, only two years a priest, would be found the next day covered in mud and snow and frozen to death. The desperation of his plight had not provoked him to panic. He now deliberately set his thoughts in order. His family, the teachers and schools, the Sisters of the Child Jesus, his fellow canons - so many things to be done, responsibilities he would have to abandon to God's providence. He shivered and staggered and leaned against the snowy wall. Inwardly he was vividly aware of himself in the Lord's presence. He put all his relationships, his hopes and his work into God's hands - hands that he knew would cherish and shelter everything with their warmth and love. He put his exhausted self and body into those same hands, telling the Lord that if he was calling him this night then he was pleased to give himself willingly. If the Lord still had a particular work for him to do, then he would continue to dedicate his life to that work as best he was able. His strength was almost gone. He knew that only the Lord's hand could save him now.

He brought his own hands back out into the biting wind and freed one foot from the mud. Slowly he felt for a hold on the slope. Both feet out of the water, hands sunk into thick, chalky clay above his head. A small shrub with a stem hardly large enough to grasp. He seemed to be outside himself, watching this weak body reaching up for another hold, still clinging to the slope in spite of the odds. His hat had gone and the snow blew in his eyes. He could never say how long it

took or how he reached the lip of the drop. What he recalled vividly was the immense effort it took to haul himself onto level ground and the tearing pain in his abdomen as he lay face down in the snow. And then the snuffling of his horse as it bent its head towards him.

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It was an episode which de La Salle recounted often enough in the course of his life. The rupture which remained with him was a tangible reminder of the time when he knew that the Lord had saved him from certain death. In times of difficulty it was a reminder that the Lord had saved him because he had work for him to do. Work which he would put all his efforts into doing but which would only succeed if the hand of the Lord was with him. Within a few months he had accepted to take the poor schoolmasters into his own house and undertaken to form them for their task as Christian teachers. That was a decision which was to lead him into his life's work of establishing the institute of the Brothers.

He was always able to thank God for the understanding and trust which he had developed through his close encounter with death. At the end of his life he again had to entrust his fragile society of Brothers of the Christian Schools to those loving hands of God to take it where he could no longer go. The peace which he felt in God's presence was with him: he knew from his experience that his Lord could be trusted.

De La Salle shares with St. Paul the distinction of having a significant encounter with God after a fall from a horse. We are not so likely to have had that experience, yet God has been present in our lives and especially apparent at certain times or in certain events. We need to reflect on our life in this context so that we do not miss the guiding light of God's spirit. Each of those moments is like the 'pearl of great price' which, once we have grasped it, we should hold on to at all costs. Such insights help to sustain us in times of doubt or difficulty just as they sustained De La Salle in the ups and downs of his own life.

## FOR PRAYER AND REFLECTION.

\* It is usually helpful to look back over our life occasionally to note those times when God seemed especially close to us. We can ask ourselves;

What did a particular experience teach us?

Have we made an effort to keep alive the memory of any important intervention of God in our life?

\* De la Salle consistently promoted the practice of recalling that we live continually in the presence of God:

"You ought to nourish yourself with God by thinking of His holy presence as often as you possibly can. That which constitutes the life of the saints is precisely their continual attention to God, and this also should form the life of those who ... seek only to accomplish His holy will, to love Him, and to make others love Him." (Meditation 67.)

We should try and find ways of putting this into practice in our lives, maybe finding particular times or places where we can find brief spaces of increased awareness.

\* Difficult times in life can block out the knowledge that God loves each one of us always. Meditating on this love of God can help us to recall it when we are under pressure. Psalm 138 dwells on God's creative presence around us. In chapter 15 of the gospel of John, Jesus says "I am the vine, you are the branches", indicating how we live intimately united to him.

\* We can pray for enlightenment regarding God's call for us by using a simple phrase repeated slowly; "Lord, what do you want to accomplish in me?"

\* De La Salle expected God to manifest himself in the ordinary events of life - things heard or seen, actions or accidents, encounters with others. Have there been any things in our day or our recent life in which we have been able to notice a sign from God?

\* A simple offering of our life, our work and our talents to God can become a prayer of real depth and commitment. •