

**ST. JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE
AND MARIAN DEVOTION (1/2)**

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In these few pages, I shall briefly pinpoint the French Marian spirituality of which John Baptist de La Salle forms part. I shall highlight some studies on the Marian devotion of the Founder and I shall give some attention to the interesting synthesis given by Canon Blain. I shall endeavour above all to highlight, though only partially through lack of space, the theocentrism and Christocentrism of doctrine and of lasallian piety.

1. The current of spirituality and Marian devotion in France in the 17th century

The spiritual writings of John Baptist de La Salle did not, at that time, have the sort of fame which they deserved. In the climate of spirituality that developed in France beginning with Pierre de Bérulle, La Salle remained in the background and was, as a consequence, rather ignored as a spiritual writer. Look at a list of spiritual writers of the great French century that has acquired a rather glorious halo. You will come across Bérulle and the writers of the Oratory: Condren, Bourgoing, Gibieuf, Amelote, Nicolas Larchevêque and Cloyseault.

Outside the Oratory, you will find the disciples of Bérulle: Olier, Vincent de Paul, Bossuet; several Jesuits: Saint-Jure, Louis Lallemand followed by Rigoleuc, Champion, Huby, Surin, Guilloché, Nouet, Jean Crasset (dear to our Founder). Other famous men should be noted: Jean de Bernières de Louvigny, Grignon de Monfort, Henri-Marie Boudon. In 1630, Father François Poiré, S.J. became known for *The Triple Crown of the Mother of God*. His work would be taken up and perfected by Mother Marie-Jacqueline Bouët de Blémur, a Benedictine, who published it in 1681 under the title of *Glories of the Mother of God*.

I am drawing on a good part of this nomenclature from the Oratorian, A. Molien's, book: *The Glories of Mary according to the writers of the French school*. I would have been proud to see John Baptist de La Salle's name among them. Alas, this work does not contain the slightest text from the holy canon of Rheims.

2. Among a few minor works

Some authors, such as Albert Tesnière, S.S.S., have extolled the *eucharistic Mission of Blessed John Baptist de La Salle*, or have presented him as a **Glory and model for the clergy**, as did Fr. J. Cellier, but, as far as I know, nothing as important has been published on the Marian mind and Marian theology of John Baptist de La Salle. I am aware of a few Canadian works that have outlined something in this direction. What would be really pleasing would be something like a thesis for a doctorate. It is obvious that I would not make up for the absence of a serious work in an article of a few pages.

I must, therefore, concentrate on a quite precise aspect in the Marian devotion of Saint John Baptist de La Salle.

3. A well-informed and thinking witness: John Baptist Blain

Could we forget a first-class witness, Canon Blain, who lived in close proximity to our Holy Founder? In *Spirit and Virtues*, Blain devoted five reflective pages to tell us of the Marian sense of our spiritual guide. They are in chapter V of book IV.

They are worth reading. It is not surprising to see Canon Blain beginning with a preface called: “Summary of the reasons which show that love of Mary is inseparable from that of Jesus”. He goes on to show the content proper to La Salle.

Blain presents his point of view in two parts. First, he speaks of de La Salle’s zeal for the devotion to the Most Blessed Virgin, telling us *that “this devotion was very dear to him”*, and he reveals him to us as ready to “*defend and extend*” this devotion. Blain considered La Salle as “*eloquent in promoting such a reasonable, just and good devotion*”.

In his eloquent persuading, the Founder put forward certain doctrinal points which showed what God has done for the Virgin Mary. He has given her to us as our mother, he has made her Queen of Angels and of human beings. He encourages us to make a difference in the devotion we have towards her, and that towards the other saints. Among the titles which honour the Virgin Mary, pride of place is given to that of Mother of God, the fullness of her grace, her holiness, the greatness of her authority and her powers. As Mother of mercy, she is interested in our salvation, with nothing dearer to her than causing the precious blood of her Son to be valued, and seeing it profited by. In a way it is Mary who is also the channel of the graces won by the merits of Jesus and it is he who distributes them through her.

This grouping of doctrinal elements is the foundation of our love for Mary. It is the positive aspect.

These are words that certainly belong to our Founder. To doubt that would be discourteous to the normal sincerity of Canon Blain.

In a second section, the ideas attributed to the Founder seem to form an array of weapons against the arguments opposing devotion to Mary. Were it to be suggested that Marian devotion was a “novelty”, La Salle would show to the contrary that it was a universal, long-standing, well-founded devotion, that it was based on the feelings of the Fathers and the Councils, on the example of the Saints and Doctors and that to pass it off as a novelty was tantamount to siding with the protestants. We will dwell for a moment on the important place which the teaching of the Fathers had in the Marian doctrine of John Baptist de La Salle: the Anselms, the Augustines, the John Damascenes, the Ambroses, the Epiphaniuses, the Bernards have pride of place there. This aspect alone would provide material for another article. It is a bold step to oppose Marian devotion since God was pleased to confirm it by an infinite number of miracles worked in all ages and everywhere in the Church. To refuse this devotion is to oppose God’s will, since, in so many ways, he displays the wish to see the Virgin Mary honoured in the Church.

It is not impossible that one or two of these ideas were written by Canon Blain, influenced by Grignon de Montfort, whose biographer he was before being our Founder’s. To establish that with any confidence would require a very meticulous study. We would, though, be correct in supposing that Blain was able to separate the two sources for himself.

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