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**Saint John Baptist de La Salle  
one of the patron saints of Christian Schools**

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The dictionaries of Saints recognise a certain number of patron Saints among teachers and schoolmasters, a few of whom go far back in Christian history: Cassian d'Imola (honoured on 13<sup>th</sup> August by the Writing Masters in the time of the Founder), for example, Nicholas of Myra (also patron Saint of children, whose feastday on 6<sup>th</sup> December was a holiday in the Christian Schools, according to the Brothers' Rules), or Gregory the Great. Others are more recent, such as Don Bosco, patron Saint of Italian apprentices (17<sup>th</sup> January, 1958).

Saint Thomas Aquinas has been the "patron of Catholic Schools", which certainly means "Catholic Academies or Universities", since 4<sup>th</sup> August, 1880. On 13<sup>th</sup> August, 1948, Pius XII proclaimed Saint Joseph Calasactius "Heavenly patron of all Christian working-class schools in the world" (according to one writing Joseph Calasactius opened the first public school). On 15<sup>th</sup> May, 1950 the same Pope named Saint John Baptist de La Salle "special patron in heaven, before the throne of God, of all educators of children and young people", whether already engaged in teaching or in training. The text of this appointment can be found in the *Documentation Catholique* of 16<sup>th</sup> July, 1950, col. 945-948, or at the end of the book by Brothers Poutet and Pungier, *An educator at grips with the society of his time*, Paris 1987. Let us have a look, fifty years on, at the impact of Pius XII's gesture towards the Founder of the Brothers and the echo of this patronage in concentric circles around his Institute.

**An imprint of beauty and a path of sanctity**

The Apostolic Brief *Quod ait Sanctus Bonaventura* opens with a quotation from Saint Bonaventure: "The only true educator is one who can stamp his pupil with an imprint of beauty, can flood him with light and can endow his heart with manly strength".

That gives the educational relationship a position far beyond a mere passing on of knowledge! Light of

knowledge and strength of virtue on an aesthetic, even mystical, basis: the imprint of beauty (it is not the stamp of his master). First of all it is not a matter of preparing the young person to serve society in which he is called to live: his vocation as a man transcends social conditions. We achieve full humanity by culture alone, and so it is in the block of generations that this discovery of fundamental values in private and public life is made. This initiation, however, goes to the heart of the person, marking the disciple with a "stamp of beauty". In the educational relationship, there is not solely the educator and his pupil, there is also a sublime presence: the true, just and absolute value of the person, God, for believers.

So the Church pays great attention to "those whose mission it is to bring up youth, because, to a great degree, it is on masters that salvation and progress in Christianity depend". The fear is of too utilitarian an aim: masters have the key to the future; whoever holds the young people in his hands will guide tomorrow's society. But the Pope recalled the initiative of the Founder of the Brothers, who extended his action to the Seminary for countryside teachers, forerunner of Teacher Training Colleges, "convinced as he was that this work [of teacher] was a very effective means of making progress in virtue and attaining sanctity". It was an indication of a spirituality of the teacher, in a profession which is a path to perfection. "A very effective means": John Baptist de La Salle did not want his disciples "to be raised to the priesthood, for fear that they would turn away from teaching".

Through this negative expression, Pius XII emphasised the lay character of the Brothers' vocation and, in consequence, of numerous Christian teachers-educators. It is their baptism which authorises them to look after the children of others, in order to open them to what is beautiful, what is true, and to manly love. This function can be lived as a ministry, a service of the Church which is indispensable to its mission. The educational function of the Brothers is so important, that even the prospect of the priesthood, though instituted by Christ, must not make them deviate from it.

**A favourable time for receiving this message**

The occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the canonisation of John Baptist de La Salle had led the Brothers to ask the Pope to name their Founder "heavenly patron before God of all teachers of both sexes, ecclesiastical or lay, actually fulfilling their role or studying in preparation for it". Pius XII, anxious to offer roads to holiness to Christians working in the different spheres of the modern world, willingly consented. The succeeding years have shown the richness of this step far beyond the boundaries of the Institute and the Church. We simply have to look around.

So this kind of pontifical declaration is not a spontaneous fruit; an occasion had to present itself (as here, an important anniversary), so that a group might suggest an announcement or a step to the Sovereign Pontiff. We must refrain, though, from simply seeing the outcome of skilful manoeuvring by people with good connections in the Vatican. While the Pope does not use his infallibility, he sees himself acting “in the plenitude of [his] Apostolic Power”: and so he will not allow himself to be manipulated just to please any particular group. The requested gesture is linked to his pastoral priorities. He wished to give Christians called to live a visibly Christian life in the modern world, genuine ideals, particularly of the kind of saints closer than those of the first centuries – we are aware that John Paul II, by multiplying canonisations, has gone much further in this direction.

I also see the hand of Providence here, soon after the 1946 Chapter which had decided to reduce “the lay male element” and to remove “the lay female element” as soon as possible in the Brothers’ schools. Powerful factors (I am thinking here of the needs of young people and Providence) decided matters differently. The “Brothers’ schools” were converted into “Lasallian schools” without it being apparent straightaway. These lay teachers who work sided by side with the Brothers, have often accepted this heavenly patron enthusiastically. Today, the Lasallian schools in the world are based on an association of Brothers and Lay teachers in which the Brothers’ numbers represent only 6% of the teaching body. The number of Lasallian schools where there are no Brothers on the staff, increasing almost everywhere. That does not stop their teachers recognising Saint John Baptist de La Salle as their founder, since he is the founder of their schools.

Other educators are being trained, or have been trained in Lasallian Universities or teacher training centres in which the Brothers work. They also, even

though they may never exercise their teaching function in a Lasallian school, can consider themselves as sons and daughters of Saint John Baptist de La Salle. This was seen in the early days of the Institute. Brother Bernard, the Founder’s first biographer, showed that several student teachers of the country teachers’ Seminary, who had been sent by their parish priests to train as teachers, chose to become Brothers. He wrote about others: “those who returned to their pastors, exercised their ministry with great piety and charity, always looking upon Monsieur de La Salle as their true Father” (CL 4,86). A note for the coming General Chapter comments: “For the Brothers as well as for the more sensitive lay teachers, the ministry arises out of feeling themselves spiritual sons of Mr de La Salle, welcomed as father and founder.”

We meet not just Christian teachers, but others too – Buddhists, Moslems, etc. or with humanist leanings and no definite religious preference – who find in the educational and spiritual Lasallian tradition sustenance for their commitment as man or woman of faith, faith in man open to higher aspirations. In fact it is God’s creative will that the education of children should be taken up by their parents and by those that they allow to share in this responsibility. As this act of the Creator touches every person in his humanity, all those who fulfil their vocation as a person by opening themselves to the sublime, have some right to share in the education of the young. What Christians can live as ministers of Christian education is equally open to those who live other humanist or religious traditions.

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On 15<sup>th</sup> May, to celebrate the “special patron in heaven, before God, of all educators of children and of youth”, we could have as intention: To promote the vocation of teachers, whether Christian or of other spiritual traditions. •