

**SAINT LA SALLE AND QUIETISM
A SPECULATION
(3/3)**

Brother Brendan Kneale

La Salle's teaching to the novices-and to the Brothers in general-had to avoid subtleties, so it is easy to see how unsophisticated men could misconstrue some of his observations. Later on, when the enemies of La Salle were gathering evidence to be used against him, they were able to contact disaffected former Brothers and, as Maillefer points out [8, 108-110], get "disgusted novices" to speak against him. La Salle's remarks about "simple attention" and "abandonment to God" could be twisted to indicate Quietist leanings.

Battersby's biography [11] discusses the excitement in Paris over Quietism and related matters. One of La Salle's benefactor's was involved. "Madame de Maintenon herself had a copy of Madame Guyon's book in her pocket" until the time in 1694 when the latter's writing on Quietism was about to get her sentenced to the Bastille (where she was imprisoned until 1703). This was just at the time when La Salle was gathering notes for his *Explanation* near Paris and so he was "concerned about the controversy raging outside." [11, 133] "With Quietism in the air De La Salle had to watch his steps very carefully. In everything he said to his novices and in every word he wrote in his *Method*, he had to make sure that he did not offend the awakened sensitiveness of the prevailing mentality." [11,134] He goes on to quote La Salle: "It is not repose that you should seek in mental prayer but light to discover your faults, vices, and passions, and the grace to correct them." He cites [11, 135] Blain's confirmation of La Salle's care to avoid "the false prayer of the Quietists."

Battersby's "Introduction" to his translations of De la Salle's meditations [12] gives a short account of the vogue of Quietism under the influence of Mme Guyon, Malaval, Molinos, Lacombe, etc., and the failure of Fénelon to see the dangers. Battersby does not include the influential Benoit de Canfield, one of Madame Acarie's circle, an influential Quietist that André Rayez spends some time on [13.] He notes also that two close friends of La Salle were opponents of the fad: Tronson and Bishop Godet. The latter made sure to condemn Quietism in his own diocese. [12, xxv] As Battersby says, "De la Salle cut right across this false mysticism." "The Quietists stood for spiritual passivity.

They aimed at reaching the heights of contemplation, which they took to be the main purpose of Mental Prayer..." [12, xxvi] In La Salle's written meditations, "He appeals directly to the intellect, the common sense, and the sense of duty of his reader." [12, xxvii]

Georges Rigault's multi-volume history of the Institute starts out by devoting Tome I to these early years. It was the Jansenists who were among La Salle's chief opponents and were the main divisive element in the French Church. "That was the atmosphere in which John Baptist De la Salle lived. It subjected him to obstacles and harassments-in his exterior work, in his relations with society, in his human sensibilities, but not in his will united to God." [14, 189] On page 190, Rigault comes to Quietism and other movements. He contrasts Fénelon and La Salle, men who were strictly contemporary and both trained at Saint Sulpice and shared common acquaintances. But the originality of La Salle is additionally clear, Rigault adds, when we see how different he was from his other notable and notorious contemporaries: Richard Simon with his bold scriptural theories and Jean de La Bruyere, a popular essayist and suspect moralist. Rather, "He brought to his disciples and to young people in catechism class the most strict orthodoxy. Not Gallican, not Quietist, not Jansenist." His mysticism was "without equivocal elements, of a solidity, of a clarity, of an influence that strengthened and calmed the faith of the simple, the faith of learners."

CONCLUSION

The mysterious sentence by Charles de la Grange, mentioned at the start of this paper, becomes understandable. There are three reasons for the enemies of La Salle to put forward an accusation of Quietism:

1. It is easy to find in the language of La Salle's writing an (unavoidable) use of terminology from Quietism (as well as from Jansenism.) [Cf. 15]
2. The enemies of La Salle were not above suborning false witnesses-disgruntled former Brothers and, more likely, suggestible novices. Many of these people had been instructed by La Salle in "the prayer of simple attention" and of renunciation, and these practices can be made to seem like following the Quietist slogan, *laissez faire Dieu*. The proper degree of passivity in prayer is hardly easy to determine.
3. Many acquaintances of the Founder were Jansenists and Gallicans, and some of them were Quietists, and thus there was guilt by association. And by inversion of the same argument, La Salle might be assumed to be a Quietist because one outstanding antagonist of La Salle was Fr. de La Chetardie, a public and official censor of Quietism! [16, 121-126]

We gather from the biographies that the largely unnamed "enemies" of St. La Salle were of three kinds: a) the writing masters and charity school directors who ran elementary schools and whose position and rights were threatened by the new Christian schools; b) the pastors and prelates who wanted to control the Christian schools in their own territories and needed to remove La Salle from his personal control of the schools; c) Jansenists and Huguenots (and maybe even Gallicans) whose doctrines La Salle forthrightly resisted. (There may have been a fourth class of enemy: the civil authorities whose laws La Salle had broken and whom he manfully-and mostly unsuccessfully-resisted.) Success breeds enemies. Enemies, if they feel strongly enough, may

resort to unethical tactics, even libel or persuading others to libel. At least, we all know how easy it is for students to misquote their teachers!

Therefore, La Salle needed friends like Father Charles de La Grange.

11. Brother Clair Stanislaus (W. J. Battersby) *SAINTE JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE*, Macmillan, 1958.

12. Brother Clair Stanislas, editor, *MEDITATIONS OF ST. JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE*, Longmans, 1952.

13. Brother Robert Berger, editor, *SPIRITUALITY IN THE TIME OF JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE*, Lasallian Publications, Landover MD, 1999. This volume contains essays by Jean-Guy Rodrigue FSC, André Rayez SJ, Yves Poutet FSC, Maurice-Auguste Hermans FSC, Michel Sauvage FSC, and Luke

Salm FSC.

14. Georges Rigault, *Histoire Generale de l'Institute des Freres des Écoles Chretiennes, Tome I: "L'oeuvre religieuse et pédagogique de Saint Jean Baptiste de la Salle."* Paris, Librairie Plon, 1938.

15. Br. Saturnino Gallegos, *AN INTRODUCTION TO THE WRITINGS OF JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE*, (trans. Br. Arthur Bertling). Rome, 1993. The author notes, page 19, that there were "resonances and parental ties" in La Salle's spirituality with several spiritual writers among whom he includes Benoit of Canfeld, whose work, *Rule of Perfection*, was condemned in 1699 and contained some Quietist material.

16. Brother Henri Bedel, *AN INTRODUCTION TO HISTORY OF THE BROTHERS OF THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS*, Lasallian Studies 5, Rome, Italy. 1998.

Acknowledgements: This paper stems in part from work done at the Buttimer Institute and has profited by comments solicited from Brothers Joseph Hendron, Luke Salm, Donald Mouton, and William Mann. •