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**WHAT IS GOING ON?
1694**

Brother John Deeney

**Letter from Leonard de Sainte Catherine,
to Father Le Gall.**

PARIS. 1694.

My dear Sire,

I have, as you know, a great interest in the persons and events of our time, so I shall be able to answer your enquiry with as much information as you shall require. M. de La Salle is not a personal acquaintance, although I have encountered him on occasion, but it is not difficult to gather opinions and anecdotes on his singular path through life.

You know how he arrived in Paris some few years ago with a number of his disciples and began to organise free Christian schools for the poor. For certain persons this would seem to be grounds for serious criticism. That he is a well-born gentleman of a certain influence living in poor circumstances has upset some clerics who do not have any inclination to live in this fashion. M. de La Salle is not easily swayed by reproaches on this subject and I have heard him described as 'headstrong', 'stubborn' and 'excessively strict' as well as 'admirable', 'saintly' and 'inspiring'...

If it were only among such clerics that he caused upset, then he would still be able to conduct his work in relative peace. However, it did not take long before his schools had such an influence in the parish of St. Sulpice that the schools of the Writing Masters were seen to be less attractive to some of those who had once patronised them. The Writing Masters have since then been involved in continual opposition to the schools of his community. Already four years ago one of his schools was closed and all the furnishings confiscated by order of the courts and it has been with some difficulty that his 'Brothers' have continued to operate.

My assessment of the above situations leads me to

believe that his way of life and his conduct of his community of teachers possess a quality which make him difficult to ignore. One's response to his example depends more, I think, on one's own interior dispositions than on the undoubted goodness of his actions. Hence the variety of opinion on his subject. He has the reputation of entrusting his work to providence, as I shall endeavour to show, and has not been discouraged by the difficulties which have presented themselves to him.

I am able to give a more personal testimony to satisfy your curiosity about his community's way of life as I have visited their house at Vaugirard, just outside the city and have been able to speak to some of the members of his community and priests who have stayed there. This house was once a fine residence but it is now as austere a monastery as you could wish. The Brothers sleep on planks covered by thin straw pallets and have only a simple blanket and coarse sheet against the cold. They have to place their beds to avoid the leaks and away from the windows where the rain or snow blows in.

You know the hardship, the cold and the famine which this last winter brought to our land. Food was so difficult to obtain for the house – those who carried it out from the city were liable to be robbed on the way – that the community had to move into the city for some months. Since that time they have returned to Vaugirard and I have recently seen that their extraordinary life continues as before.

I am sure that you have visited certain places or shrines that you sense are 'holy' as if they were steeped in prayer or filled with light. I was struck by this sensation when I visited the house. Despite its dilapidated state it is quiet and orderly, amazingly peaceful and happy. The Brothers are thin and poorly clad but behave with courtesy and dignity and have a clear sense of purpose. I entered the house preparing to feel sorry for them but left envying them their spiritual richness. I must confess to feeling a certain emptiness in myself when I returned to my own dwelling and reflected on my experience of that day.

I observed Monsieur de La Salle walking in the garden. He is good-looking and well-built and is clearly held in great affection by his community. They are also inspired by his presence and his example and his legendary devotion to prayer. This I could quite understand after hearing some of the stories which they had to tell. One will serve as an example.

At the time the Brothers were moving into the house, the day was approaching when the carters transporting their furniture and those who were repairing the floor would require their pay. But there was no money. The bursar went to Monsieur de La Salle in a panic, not knowing how he was going to deal with these workers who would require immediate payment. De La Salle told him that he had no money either and instructed him to pray about it. On the following day, when the money was to be paid, he got

the same calm answer but he was sufficiently agitated to reply that Monsieur de La Salle should pray as well since the situation was so grave. Shortly after that the bursar had the idea of looking again in a cupboard which had been standing open outside for several days. He was overwhelmed to find in there forty crowns, just what he needed to pay the workers. Such events as this are not uncommon and it convinces the Brothers that they are indeed sustained by a most attentive providence.

I trust that my account will give you sufficient idea of what is happening with this community. My encounters with it have not left me unmoved. I am most pleased to say that I believe it to be a movement which is capable of being a great force for good in our land. We shall, no doubt, see how it develops over the years.

Yours in Our Lord,

Father Leonard de Sainte Catherine.

FOR PRAYER AND REFLECTION.

* The establishments that De La Salle was opening in Paris were 'free, Christian schools' for the children of the poor. He was very conscious of this as a part of the mission of the Church. He wanted the schools, wherever possible, to be closely linked with the action and teaching of the Church in spite of the difficulties caused him by certain sections of the Church officials.

You could reflect on your own sense of being part of the mission of the Church to bring the 'good news' to the world and to minister to those in need.

You could try listing your own positive experience of 'Church'. Is there more that you could gain from or

contribute to your church community, recognising that the two elements are intertwined?

* Vaugirard has remained legendary amongst the Brothers because of the austerity of the years there. De La Salle remarked: «Our Brothers will survive so long as they are poor. They will lose the spirit of their vocation as soon as they start procuring for themselves the unnecessary commodities of life.»

We all have things which take us away from what God calls us to do or to be. We should try not to accumulate goods over and beyond our real needs or become obsessed with some peripheral aspect of living. We should examine our lifestyle prayerfully and ask for the Lord's help to see which things are obstacles to us in our relationship with him.

Family fast days provide a very practical way of starting on a simple lifestyle in a way that will benefit the less well off.

* The behaviour and way of life of the Brothers at Vaugirard made an impact on the local people and also attracted more young men to join the community. What witness does my life give of the Christianity that I profess. As G. K. Chesterton said: «If I were to be accused of being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict me?»

* Lord,
you have enriched our lives in many ways.
Give us each day
the wisdom to recognise
which things are important and which are not.
Show us how best
to use the time and talents you have given us.
Help us to use all opportunities wisely
that we may give in service to others
the good gifts we have received from you. •