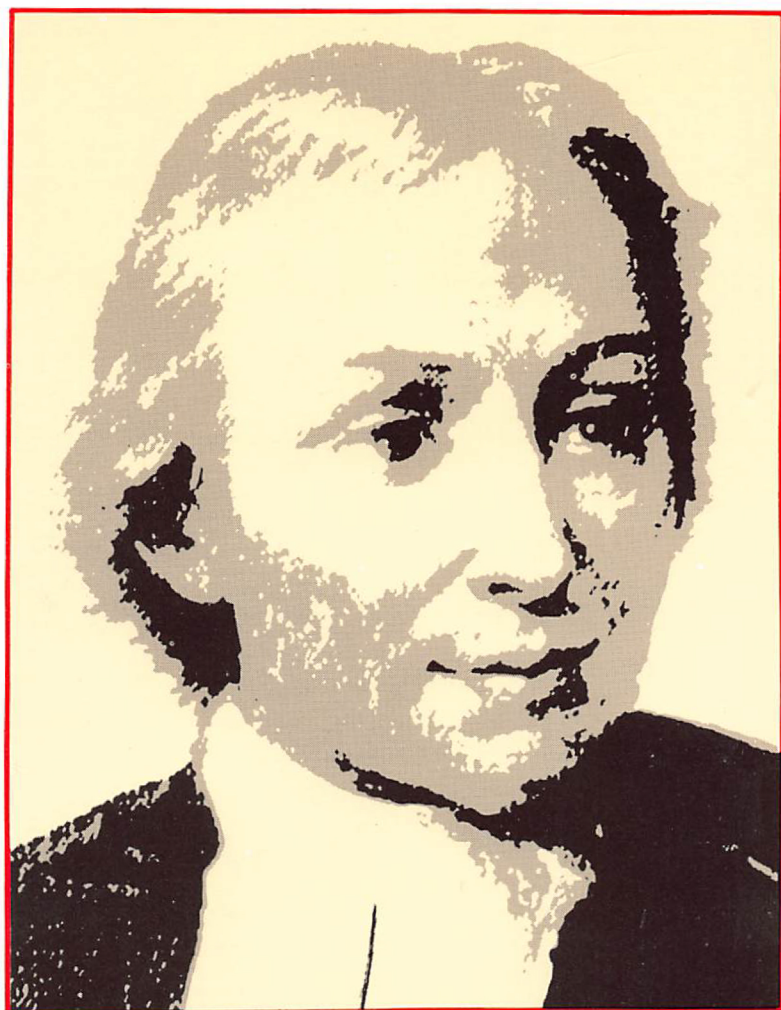


# De La Salle

A Founder as Pilgrim



Edwin Bannon FSC

# DE LA SALLE: A FOUNDER AS PILGRIM

*Edwin Bannon FSC*

*De La Salle*  
*A Founder as Pilgrim*

A reading of the life of the Founder of the Brothers  
of the Christian Schools in the light of  
*L'Itinéraire Evangélique de Saint Jean-Baptiste De La Salle*,  
the first volume of the doctoral thesis of  
MIGUEL ADOLFO CAMPOS-MARINO F.S.C.

DE LA SALLE PROVINCIALATE,  
LONDON.

This edition, 1988, published by  
DE LA SALLE PROVINCIALATE  
61 VICTORIA ROAD,  
KENSINGTON, LONDON W8 5RH

Typesetting by Typeform Ltd, Dublin  
Originally Printed in Ireland by  
Mount Salus Press, Dublin.

ISBN: 979-8-284934-13-5

*Acknowledgements:*

Thanks are tendered to the following publishers for permission to quote from the books named:

The Longman Group UK Ltd., *De La Salle: Letters and Documents* by W. J. Battersby (1952).

Darton, Longman and Todd, *The Theology of Vatican II* by B. C. Butler (1967).

Reprinted in 2025 by  
the Christian Brothers Conference (RELAN)  
Lasallian Resource Center

Copyright ©, 1988, Edwin Bannon FSC

# *Contents*

Introduction	<i>page</i> 1
1 “Paroles-force” and “Événements-clefs”	8
2 Prelude to a Mission	19
3 How the Institute began	35
4 The Founder’s Reflections on the Beginnings	53
5 First Steps in Community Living	60
6 Point of No Return	66
7 Building Community	82
8 The Move to the Capital	88
9 The Memoir on the Habit	94
10 From Community to Society	104
11 The Formula of Vows as a “Parole-force”	117
12 A Charism at Work against the Odds	123
13 More “Paroles-force”: The Personal Rules . . .	142
14 . . .And Some Letters	156
15 Self-effacement for the Good of the Enterprise	165
16 Light out of Darkness	178
17 “Monsieur Notre Très Cher Père . . .”	185

## Introduction

The full title of Brother Miguel Campos's doctoral thesis is *L'ITINERAIRE EVANGELIQUE DE SAINT JEAN—BAPTISTE DE LA SALLE ET LE RECOURS A L'ECRITURE DANS SES "MEDITATIONS POUR LE TEMPS DE LA RETRAITE"*. It has been published in two volumes as Nos 45 and 46 of the *Cahiers Lasalliens* series. The two volumes correspond to the two elements of the title and, coincidentally, both have the same number of pages, 389. At first glance, the relationship between the two parts of the title is not self-evident, but, in fact, a perusal of the two volumes leaves the reader in no doubt that the interdependence is complete. The *Méditations pour le Temps de la Retraite* are, in Campos's understanding, the thematic treatment by John Baptist de La Salle, writing towards the end of his laborious life, of the spiritual itinerary by which God had led him to found and consolidate the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. The charting of this itinerary is the task Brother Miguel set himself for the first part of his thesis, and the present book is a modest attempt to convey something of the richness of chronicle and commentary to be found in the first volume. The Campos treatment of the MTR, and specifically of the scriptural content of those Meditations, would be material for another attempt to make some of his findings available to English-speaking readers: it would be a task most congenial to the present writer if time were to permit.

It should be mentioned also that Brother Miguel gives a sub-title to his work, calling it a *Contribution à l'étude sur les fondements évangéliques de la vie religieuse*. In the course of a lengthy *Introduction Générale* Campos presents a summary of current research into this aspect of the religious life, research that has been carried out since the Second Vatican Council. In fifty-five densely-packed pages the author surveys the impact of the Council documents, especially *Lumen Gentium* and *Perfectae Caritatis*, on the theology of the religious life and on the profession by vow of the evangelical counsels. He concludes with an application of his survey to one of the Institutes of consecrated life in the Church, that of the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

Again, the present work offers nothing of this rich discussion, the intention of the writer being only to draw upon that part of the thesis which relates to Campos's 'reading' of the life of Saint John Baptist de La Salle. And it is in keeping with this intention that we select for discussion from his general Introduction that part of it which considers the Institute's knowledge of its Founder's life, with particular reference to the primary sources of that information.

The survey has its starting-point in the concern of the first Superior General, Brother Barthélemy Truffet, to gather, soon after the death of M. de La Salle, written reminiscences and testimonials which might serve towards the composition of a biography of the Founder. Our knowledge of the life of John Baptist de La Salle derives from the work of the first three men to make use of the resulting material, all of them writing from the vantage-point of having known personally the subject of their biographies.

The first in time of these was Jean Dauge, who was born at Fribourg, Switzerland, on 24th June 1697, and entered the Institute in March 1713, receiving the name of Frère Bernard. Very soon after the death of the Founder, Bernard was given the task of writing the biography, and to facilitate his work he was handed the collection of statements and tributes that had been received together with, and more significantly than the rest, a document in M. de La Salle's own handwriting. But judging these materials insufficient for his purpose, the young biographer (still in his early twenties) sought to supplement them by interviewing one or two members of the De La Salle family and also some Sisters of Nicolas Roland's Community of the Holy Child Jesus; he consulted also the superior of the seminary of Saint-Sulpice. Having completed a first draft of the biography he sent it to Canon Louis de La Salle, John Baptist's brother, for his observations and corrections. The Canon, however, held on to the manuscript for so long that Bernard decided to make a new start and produce a second draft. But all that has come down to us from this activity on Bernard's part is a short manuscript of eighty-six exercise-book pages, relating to the period 1651-1688 in the Founder's life.

In a preface, Bernard informed his readers that the work would be divided into four sections, the first comprising six chapters and the second, nine. We have no information about the third and fourth parts, and the second part has not reached us complete. The manuscript that has survived is not Bernard's original but a handwritten copy of it. Brother Maurice-Auguste Hermans has

identified the copyist as a certain Frère Romain, Charles Plansson, who was born in 1671 but did not enter the Institute until 1719, the year of M. de La Salle's death. The copy can be dated from the inscription 1723 on the title-page. The literary quality of the manuscript is of minor interest, and Bernard's chronology is shaky, especially with regard to facts not directly related to the foundation of the Institute. The author admits the stylistic limitations of the work but claims that these were present in the testimonials he had received and which he had wished to use conscientiously.

The particular interest of Bernard's modest effort, then, is not at all literary. Its significance rather is that it is the first attempt to present a biography of John Baptist de La Salle and it is the work of one who had known the Founder personally and was writing shortly after his death. It retains, even with all its literary shortcomings, a quality of sincerity and spontaneous emotion not present in the other early biographies. But, over and above this, two important data are implicit in the lowly work. The first of these is contained in the wording of Bernard's title which, translated literally, is: *The admirable conduct of divine Providence in the person of the Venerable Servant of God, John Baptist de La Salle, Priest, Doctor of Theology, former Canon of the Cathedral of Rheims and Founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, presented in four parts.* It is a veritable fanfare of a title and it tells us that Bernard, who had known the Founder personally for six years and had conversed with others who had known him, and had read many eye-witness testimonials, saw the life of John Baptist de La Salle as a scarcely perceptible summons of divine Providence to which his hero responded with total trust. Alas, it must be added that the author's limited ability prevented him from living up to the promise of this title, and the specific originality of M. de La Salle's response hardly comes through in the text.

The second contribution that Bernard's work has made to subsequent study of the Founder consists in his information about a certain autograph document, in the hand of De La Salle, which had been made available to him for his biographer's task. He refers to this document in these words: "*Here then is the way in which the Institute of the Brother of the Christian Schools came into being. The servant of God himself gives us the information in summary form in a handwritten document which he kept undisclosed for more than twenty years but which was fortunately discovered (during his absence in Provence).*" The significance of this document will be discussed later.

The second of the Founder's biographers was a nephew of his, Dom François Elie Maillefer, a Maurist Benedictine, Librarian for many years at the monastery of Saint-Remi in Rheims. He produced two versions of his biography of his uncle, the first in 1723 (an implicit challenge, therefore, to the modest "commissioned" life by Frère Bernard) and the second in 1740. The circumstances which led him to follow his first version of *La Vie de M. Jean-Baptiste de La Salle prêtre, docteur en théologie, ancien chanoine de la cathédrale de Reims et Instituteur des Frères des Ecoles chrétiennes* with a second version fifteen years later are outlined by him in his foreword to the second draft. He says that the idea of writing the life in the first place had come from "*several learned persons*" and that these had expressed satisfaction with the version he had produced in 1723, to such effect that plans were put in hand for its publication. The death, however, of the admirer who had undertaken to bear the expense of the printing prevented these plans from succeeding and the author himself had made no further efforts to have the work published.

In 1724 (continues the Foreword) the Brothers of the Christian Schools learned that Dom Elie had written a life of their Founder and they made repeated requests for a copy, at first without success. But "*one of their number,*" says the biographer, "*called Brother Thomas, was so insistent that I finally gave him my manuscript on condition that if it were decided to publish it, no change must be made in it without my consent. He has not kept his word. The manuscript was sent to Saint-Yon in Rouen, and there given to the Superior General who ordinarily resides there. The latter thereupon commissioned a clergyman of Rouen to compose a new life and this has been published in two volumes. These have only to be read to convince anyone of the poor taste and lack of discernment possessed by their author. The greater portion of the facts he relates in this work are drowned, so to speak, in a confused mass of poorly distributed personal reflections. His style is careless, and although he has not scrupled to copy me word for word in some places, he has not judged fit to acknowledge his source.*"

The "*clergyman of Rouen*" referred to in these unflattering terms was Canon Blain, whose two volumes appeared simultaneously in 1733. Maillefer's complaint that he had been plagiarised without acknowledgement by Blain is offset by the probability that for his 1740 version Maillefer made use of Blain's work (likewise without acknowledgement!).

The original manuscript of Maillefer's 1723 draft has not come down to us, but two handwritten copies of it, made two or three

decades later, are preserved in the Institute archives at Rome. The Benedictine's 1740 version, likewise an unpublished manuscript, is preserved in the municipal Library of Rheims. Both drafts, 1723 and 1740, have been published in the *Cahiers Lasalliens* series, with a comparative study by Bro. Maurice Hermans.

Maillefer's two biographies present, in Miguel Campos's view, "a first-hand witness account of the De La Salle event, offered in a historical form certainly more technically accomplished than that of Bernard, and without the sometimes naive comments of the latter. Writing as a member of the De La Salle family, and belonging to a Jansenist milieu, Maillefer omits all polemical references, preferring to stress the spiritual qualities of his uncle. Because of his own proximity to the events he describes and to the family and social circle in which M. de La Salle was born and brought up, Maillefer's work has an inestimable value as a primary source."

There remains the two-volume biography by Jean-Baptiste Blain, a work which has enjoyed the widest diffusion in the Institute, though its author has remained relatively unknown. Blain was a fellow-student of Louis-Grignon de Montfort at the Jesuit College at Rennes and afterwards in Paris at the seminary of Saint-Sulpice. His spiritual director at the Paris seminary was Jacques Bäu hin who had also been a counsellor of M. de La Salle. Blain was ordained priest at Noyon by Mgr. d'Aubigné who later became Archbishop of Rouen and invited Blain to transfer to the archdiocese in 1710. The latter became, in due course, ecclesiastical superior to several religious congregations: he composed the Rules of the Ernemont Institute taking as his inspiration the Brothers' *Règles Communes* and the rules drawn up by Père Barré for his congregation of teaching sisters. In 1712, during M. de La Salle's prolonged absence in the south of France, Blain was named ecclesiastical superior of the Brothers' community at Saint-Yon. Apropos of this appointment, with reference to Blain's role as biographer of the Founder, Br. Maurice Hermans has this to say: "His title of ecclesiastical superior of the Brothers had necessarily given him unrivalled access to the Institute's mother house during the final years of his hero's life. As representative of the Institute with the archdiocesan authorities, the future biographer enjoyed the confidence of the saintly Founder: the Brothers themselves were to be astonished at the way he was able to take into account certain facts which were known only to himself and to his revered friend . . . Some years later, in 1745, during an

archdiocesan enquiry, more than one Brother recalled that Blain was a man exceptionally well-informed on matters connected with their Congregation.”

The biography appeared in two volumes at Rouen in 1733, under the title *La Vie de Monsieur Jean-Baptiste de La Salle, Instituteur des Frères des Ecoles Chrétiennes*. It has been re-published in facsimile as Nos. 7 and 8 of the *Cahiers Lasalliens*. An authoritative article on Lasallian studies, written by Père André Rayez S.J. and published in 1952 in the *Revue d'Ascétique et de Mystique*, sums up both the faults and the inestimable value of Canon Blain's achievement in the following terms: “Blain is a biographer of the old school, too often merely a long-winded panegyrist, sometimes a clumsy apologist; the good Canon embellishes his own memories and improves on those of others; he allows difficulties to disappear without trace and demolishes with panache the adversaries of his hero, be they Sulpicians, bishops or cardinals, or – a fortiori – Jansenists or Quietists. But my apologies to his memory! His biography, written so soon after the death of the Saint, by one who was a contemporary of his subject and a witness of his life and who, in addition, questioned others who knew the Saint well, remains, whatever its shortcomings, irreplaceably precious as a source.”

With reference to Blain's use of documents, another commentator, Maurice Hermans, has this assessment: “One may regret that he does not always identify his sources; or that, here and there, he curtails quotations which would be of much more value to us than his own wordy commentaries. But one may not gratuitously accuse him of lack of rigour in his use of his sources, nor may one feel entitled to re-word his text.” The study of Blain's sources, though still in its early stages, has produced a number of hypotheses. But (says Miguel Campos, after Rigault) one thing is certain: on the origins and earliest years of the Institute and on the struggles which the Founder had to sustain in consolidating his work, Blain provides a mass of information impossible to find elsewhere.

A critical study of the references common to the three earliest biographies would throw light on a number of historical data and on the documents relating to those data. In this connection we are indebted to the indefatigable General Editor of the *Cahiers Lasalliens*, Bro. Maurice Hermans, for two invaluable tools of research, published as Nos. 9 and 10 in that series: *Bernard, Maillefer et Blain: Index cumulatif des Noms de Lieux et des Noms de Personnes* (1974) and

*Bernard, Maillefer et Blain: 1. Index analytique cumulatif. II. Relevé des dits et des écrits attribués à Jean-Baptiste de La Salle.* (1979). But whatever the nature of the areas of contact relating each to the others, these three biographers remain the premier witnesses for a study of M. de La Salle's spiritual itinerary, as discernible in the concrete data of his existence.

It remains true that all three considered the man they wrote about to be a saint and because of this their works are marked by a priori judgements. Furthermore, all the facts of his life are interpreted according to the religious climate of the period and to the personal standpoint of each writer. Their reading of the "De la Salle event" (Campos's term), while being undoubtedly valid and rich, has to be viewed with a certain reserve. For the three biographers, but especially Blain, conformed to a particular mode of hagiography having its own principles not clearly discernible now. Père Rayez, in the article mentioned above, while not at all questioning Blain's integrity of purpose, enters this caveat about his work: "When biographers dispense with documentary evidence and omit to make explicit reference to authentic sources, the chapters they devote to the spirit and virtues of their heroes risk becoming either collections of stereotyped banalities or mere spiritual treatises . . . But rhetorical discourses . . . can lay no claim to representing the mind of the biographer's hero unless they are based on undisputed facts or documentary evidence. In the case of Blain there is always the risk . . . that we may take the biographer's thought and reflections for those of John Baptist de La Salle."

The indispensable need, if we are to draw nearer to knowing the Founder as the man he really was, concludes Miguel Campos, is "not only to present a chronological account of what happened in his life-story, but, still more, to make the effort to enter into that sequence of occurrences *with the same understanding as he had* of their meaning interpreted in faith."

# 1

## “*Paroles-Force*” and “*Événements-Clefs*”

The originality of Miguel Campos’s approach to an understanding of John Baptist de La Salle’s inspiration and achievement imposed the need to devise one or two technical terms, the usefulness of which becomes increasingly apparent as the argument unfolds throughout the thesis. An important example of this *ad hoc* vocabulary is the expression *parole-force* which Campos is at pains, in an introductory chapter, to define and analyse at some length.

The author suggests that in every man’s life there are a limited number of occasions when a particular combination of circumstances obliges him to pause and take stock, to assess his motives, the direction in which his life is moving, the value, greater or less, of what he has so far accomplished, his relationships with other people, his grasp of the multiform and ever changing reality of the world in which his personal life-story is unfolding. And, having taken stock, having reached conclusions about himself and about his life’s purpose, he will formulate his findings, perhaps only to himself in the deep recesses of his conscience, but perhaps also in the tangible terms of the written or spoken word. Such a formulation, made at a critical moment in a person’s life, is what (if the present writer has understood him fairly correctly) Miguel Campos means by a *parole-force*. The element of *-force* in his invented term derives, as he points out, from the analogy of kinetic energy in physics: the *parole* (meaning the “word”, but understood in the ampler connotation of the versatile French term) is expressed at the moment of pause when the potential energy stored in the sequence of events leading to that moment is about to be released in decisive action for the future. Action, in fact, is the generating source of the *parole-force*, and action is its product.

Campos’s analysis of the term is much more extensive and thorough than the above summary would imply and the three pages which he devotes to just this penetrating analysis reveal an impressive expertise in the field of psychology. But the use he makes of the term for his purpose – which, briefly expressed, is to discover what was John Baptist de La Salle’s own understanding of his vocation – will make good any insufficiencies left by the above synopsis.

Not that our author would claim to arrive at a total revelation of the personal spiritual experience of the Founder. There is a limit to such research, beyond which lies mystery. This is true for every human being, but especially so in the case of a man like De La Salle whose life was, so to speak, totally polarised by the sustained appeal that God made to him to accomplish a work for which little in his social origins, his training or his temperament seemed particularly to equip him. But we shall find (claims Campos) that history has, in fact, recorded certain *paroles-force* in the life of John Baptist de La Salle, a careful examination of which, in their context, will enable us to approach the point in his intimate spiritual experience and self-understanding beyond which the secret was between God and himself.

Where then are we to locate these *paroles-force* which are to guide us in the journey of discovery we are undertaking? First, naturally, among the few but precious writings of the Founder which the Institute happens to possess in their original manuscript; but then, also, in certain other writings cited explicitly or implicitly in the earliest biographies. Reference has already been made, in our introductory chapter, to one such document which was made available to Frère Bernard when he was asked to write M. de La Salle's biography. It seems at first sight to be merely a summary account of how the Institute originated, but it is more than that. It tells us much about the man who wrote it (and who, Bernard tells us, kept it to himself for more than twenty years). It is, in fact, an important *parole-force* in the Founder's life.

Blain, for his part, recognised that the biographer of a person who has died with a reputation for holiness must utilise, in the first place, any personal memoirs left by the subject of the biography. But he affirms that for his life of John Baptist de La Salle he possessed no such personal revelations. Blain asserts that the only way he could interpret the Founder's mind and self-understanding – "*ce qui se passait au dedans de lui*", as he himself expresses it, was to study his hero's actions. And for a knowledge of the Founder's actions he declares that he was dependent on the written testimonials "*carefully assembled by the late Brother Barthélemy as soon as the holy founder was dead, and subsequently arranged by one of the Brothers*".

The fact of the matter is that Blain was more concerned to edify his readers than to enter into research on the psychology of the man about whom he was writing, not even the psychology which would

throw light on the spiritual physiognomy of the saint. His formula was to present a prolonged lesson in Christian perfection and to illustrate the lesson with examples drawn from De La Salle's life-story. He was, so to speak, into his particular biographical stride when he was telling his readers that M. de La Salle was "*a perfect model of regularity, of silence, of recollection, of patience, of obedience, of humility, of detachment from all things, of abandonment to Providence, of resignation to the orders of God, of disdain for the world, of attraction for the cross and for humiliations.*" (Vol. I. p. 113). To demonstrate all these virtues he drew upon the reminiscences of the eyewitnesses whose testimonials he had at his disposal. But in point of fact it frequently happens that the type of sanctity of which Blain proposes M. de La Salle as a model is directly at variance with the Founder's manner of acting – as described by Blain himself – and at variance also with the writings of the Founder which the biographer transmits. Unfortunately we know too little about the laws of the particular genre of hagiography practised by Blain, including, for example, the degree of exactness which he felt obliged to observe when quoting texts or testimonials. There is always the possibility, as Fr. Rayez pointed out, that the ideas and reflections which Blain attributes to M. de La Salle are Blain's own.

It remains true, nevertheless, that the language used by Blain (and by the eye-witnesses whose testimonials he drew upon) has undoubted affinities with the Founder's own manner of expression. Once we come to terms with the style of Blain's writing we can, with good reason, hope to see beyond his "reading" of the Founder's life and inspiration into the latter's own understanding of his spiritual journey. Moreover, Blain's claim that he lacked personal memoirs and self-revealing writings of M. de La Salle himself was only relatively correct and that only from Blain's own point of view. The irreplaceable value of his biography rests precisely on the fact that he quotes personal correspondence and memoirs of the Saint which would otherwise be unknown. For example, Blain is our only source for a memorandum, *The Rules I have imposed upon myself*, which certainly tells us much about the Founder's spiritual experience. He also makes frequent reference to "*a memoir which M. de La Salle composed later on to inform the Brothers about the means divine Providence had used to establish their Institute*". This is obviously the memoir which had already been utilised by Bernard and which, it seems, was passed on to Blain together with the other documents assembled

by Bernard. As we shall see, Blain's use of this manuscript is more explicit than Bernard's.

Contrary, in fact, to what he thought, Blain had available an invaluable documentation for an interpretation of the religious experience of John Baptist de La Salle. But it is clear also that his use of his source-material fell short of the standards of present-day historiography. He condensed or expanded his quotations, modifying their content, introducing personal reflections in a rhetorical style, and so on. But his less than adequate use of the material does not, and cannot, alter the fact that it is to Blain above all that subsequent knowledge of such material is owed. Therein, it is fair to suggest, lies his claim to the lasting gratitude of the Institute.

Significantly, it is the Benedictine librarian, Dom Elie Maillefer, who seems, among the source-biographers, to have perceived most clearly the need for critical standards. In the foreword to the second version of his life of the Founder, he wrote: "*The written testimonials which were put at my disposal and on which I have had to base this biography were not always as detailed as a conscientious wish for accuracy would have liked them to be. Hence certain gaps, certain omissions, will be found which a more ample treatment would have to supply. I have moreover kept in mind the taste of our present age which has little liking for what savours of the marvellous, and have left out several incidents which would have strained the credulity of my readers. Those of the sort which I have included I have found to be based on reliable evidence.*" But even Maillefer does not observe rigorous standards in his use of the testimonials. His controlled style of writing, nevertheless, does serve to throw into relief the religious experience of his uncle, John Baptist: the Founder's spirit of penance, his poverty and his trust in Providence are all to be discerned in the straightforward narrative of his career presented by his nephew.

Unfortunately the notes on the Founder which Brother Barthélemy had collected were lost after being utilised by Bernard, Blain and, indirectly, by Maillefer. In the *Revue d'Ascétique et de Mystique* article of 1952 (mentioned in our introductory chapter) the Jesuit, André Rayez, presented a summary of the available source-material for a study of St. John Baptist de La Salle and added this comment: "For a knowledge of the Saint's spiritual personality and the characteristic features of his interior life we are without guides. Almost no personal writings are available . . ." But this assertion of Père Rayez seems to Miguel Campos to resemble Blain's own lament

about his lack of personal documentation. In each case the implication is that in order to know John Baptist de La Salle's interior life in its reality it would be indispensable to have autobiographical writings detailing the nature of his relationship with God. So, for example, the Founder's *Memoir on the Habit* is seen by Rayez as documentary evidence relating to the foundation of the Institute rather than to the Saint's personal spirituality. It is undoubtedly true that this document tells us much about the consolidation of the enterprise of the Christian Schools at a particular stage of its existence; but to limit its usefulness to that is to imply the belief that only personal confidences are really valid source-material for the study of a saint's spiritual life.

But, argues Campos, what has to be kept in mind, certainly in the case of John Baptist de La Salle, is that his religious experience cannot be isolated from his response to God's will as he perceived it in the existential circumstances of his life. His relationship with God developed in depth and definition certainly through his willing submission to the guidance of his spiritual directors, but not only through that. It developed no less surely from his initial engagement with a group of schoolmasters, through the successive steps he took to consolidate the Community, through his incorporating (or, to use Miguel Campos's expressive French term "incarnating") himself into the Community for what he perceived to be a divinely-ordained mission, through his total commitment to an evangelical enterprise, that of Christian Schools – a commitment unto death. To make a distinction, says Campos persuasively, between "God's dealings with John Baptist" (Blain's "*ce qui se passait entre Dieu et M. de La Salle*") and God's dealings with him *together with* his disciples in the establishing of the Christian Schools is to "disincarnate" the Founder's religious experience and therefore to distort and even totally falsify it for our understanding.

Campos expresses this in another way by suggesting that the time has come to re-orientate research into the nature of John Baptist de La Salle's spirituality. Students of this have hitherto depended habitually, if not exclusively, on Book Four of Blain's biography, the part which we know as *The Spirit and Virtues of M. de La Salle*. What future students must look at as well is the small but vitally significant collection of attestations deriving from the Founder himself, seeing these as documentary evidence relating to the origins of the Institute at given stages of its evolution (which is what in the first place they

are) but also as invaluable sources of information about the mind and heart, the psychological and spiritual outlook, of the man who wrote them.

It is at this point in his discussion that Miguel Campos introduces another technical term which he has devised for the purpose of his investigation. This is the term *événement-clef*, an expression which looks as if it might slip more easily into English (as “key-event”) but which, like *parole-force*, it seems better to leave in French so as to retain more surely the precise significance which Campos attaches to it. For we shall see that the term does not represent particular concrete events in the life of the Founder but rather a sequence of incidents, a combination of circumstances, marking a definable stage in John Baptist’s spiritual itinerary. The word “*événement*” here seems to bear the more specifically root sense of “outcome” rather than the sense of a major occurrence suggested by the English term “event”.

Remarking that not all the incidents recorded in M. de La Salle’s life by his first biographers can be verified with the scientific rigour now expected of serious scholarly study, Campos asserts that many of them can stand up to the closest examination. It is from these verifiable incidents that our author formulates his theory that there were occasions in the Founder’s life when he was faced with the necessity of making a determinative option in the course of his spiritual journey. Antecedent occurrences led him to particular points in that journey at which choices seemed available to him. One of these choices was the one that God willed he should make; the others would have led him away from the path which God had marked out for him. Subsequent developments arising from each such option proved that he had correctly discerned the choice God willed for him and that his courage in making that choice rendered it possible for God to bring him to high holiness and at the same time to accomplish the divine salvific purpose which John Baptist was called upon to mediate. It is such crucial moments in the Founder’s life which Campos designates by the term *événements-clefs*.

Campos chooses four such *événements-clefs* for particular consideration, and his choice of them is inspired by the existence of corresponding *paroles-force* which interpret these occasions for us in words written by the Founder himself or, in the exceptional case of one, words written to the Founder by disciples whose mind and spirit were so attuned to his own that, at a decisive moment in their

life and his, they spoke with the voice of the Saint himself.

Needless to say, there is no question of supposing that the life of John Baptist de La Salle can be fragmented into four significant episodes with little importance to be attached to the intervening periods of his career. Every verifiable incident in the story of his life is essential to the ultimate discovery of the kind of person he was and the nature of his response to the God who summoned him to a task. But it is Miguel Campos's claim that in De La Salle's life there were four conjunctures in particular which not only marked major critical stages in his spiritual pilgrimage, and which, in themselves, shed especially revealing light on the man as he was (as contrasted with the *image* of the man bequeathed to us by the biographers, particularly the admirable Canon Blain), but which are immeasurably enhanced as to the degree of light they shed, by documents of unquestionable authenticity written, not indeed as formal interpretations of those episodes, but serving as such because of the providential temporal and circumstantial relationship linking the documents with the events.

What were these four *événements-clefs* and their related *paroles-force*? First, there was the situation in which John Baptist accepted his vocation as Founder of a Society which would bring the gospel to the poor through the channel of education. The document which enlightens us on the circumstances which led to his recognition of this vocation and his acceptance of what it entailed is a memoir of which the manuscript is now lost but which, as we saw in our introductory chapter, Bernard claims to have been his principal source of information. This document, now conveniently referred to as the *Memoir of the Beginnings*, gives us an insight into the development of the Founder's thought as he passed from the role of well-to-do Canon of the distinguished Chapter of Rheims, giving wise counsel and indeed protection and hospitality to a fortuitous assemblage of would-be schoolmasters, to that of inspirer and organiser of a Community of men who were to be religious as well as schoolmasters and who were to have their *raison d'être* in the educational service of the poor.

The second *événement-clef* is represented by the rich and complex period of the Founder's move to Paris. The difficulties he encountered there in the parish of Saint-Sulpice, the opposition coming from the schoolmaster corporations, the defections within the Community, and the rest – all constituted a sequence of tests

which brought John Baptist to a further point of decision in his spiritual journey. In Rheims he had discerned as the will of God that he should establish a community of religious-schoolmasters for the service of the poor. The Paris experience showed him that such an enterprise could not succeed without suffering and struggle; that since the redemption of mankind had been purchased by the passion and death of the Son of God made man, it could be mediated to successive generations of mankind only by participation in the redemptive suffering and death. It was not sufficient for John Baptist to make the first great option with which he was faced, much as that had already cost him in abnegation and blind faith: he had to endorse his acceptance in heroic fashion when the odds against his purpose showed themselves daunting and discouraging.

Two documents shed light on this period for us: the *Memoir on the Habit* and the *Formula of Vows*. The former was, in the first place, the Founder's written defence of the kind of vesture he had given his lay-religious schoolmasters. But its implications went much deeper: the attempt to change the style of dress of the Brothers was seen by M. de La Salle as a challenge to the autonomy of the Community and, in the longer term, a challenge to the Community's continued existence. The vows formula, personally composed by the Founder for the occasion in 1694 when he and twelve of his first disciples pronounced a perpetual vow to live in association and under obedience, constitutes, in Miguel Campos's words, "a privileged document among the Founder's autobiographical writings, in that it expresses a personal and communitarian religious option made at a historic moment in the Community's development".

The third of the selected *événements-clefs* is the sequence of occurrences which led beyond the decision to consolidate to the further decision to extend. His faith now firm that the work he had undertaken was God's work, John Baptist recognised in the calls that began increasingly to come to him for the services of his Brothers successive calls from God; and he opted to respond not only when the human desiderata for such a response were present but also when his main resource was his faith in a Providence that would not fail to sustain a work which was divinely willed. Yet another *parole-force* is available to enlighten us on the intimate relationship which had developed at this stage between John Baptist and the God who continued, step by step, to beckon him and at the same time to guide and strengthen him. It is an unassuming document with an

unassuming heading, *Rules I have imposed upon myself*, a document whose importance has been underestimated, partly because it is so slight in form and partly because, as used by Blain, the list of *Rules* fitted in so unobtrusively into the hagiographical context of the biographer's discourse. Campos adds to his discussion of this document some considerations on the correspondence of the Founder which is likewise instructive on this period of the Community's expansion.

Fourth and finally there is the period of escalating tension in Paris, arising from pressures outside, but also within, the Community, pressures exerted by persons who thought that the Society should be governed in a different way from that which had evolved and which the Founder believed to be right. The effect of these pressures was to confront John Baptist with (as he saw it) another option crucial for the future existence and welfare of the Community which he had established, consolidated and extended. But only a man who had reached a heroic degree of holiness and a total detachment from all that was not perceived to be God's will, could have come to see the option in the terms in which the Founder saw it. He reached a conviction that the prosperity of the enterprise of the schools required his personal withdrawal from it. He believed that his continued presence in Paris was proving a hindrance to the work of the Society and that the accumulating tensions would disappear if he removed himself from the scene. It was a moment in the Founder's spiritual itinerary which was full of significance not only for his own intimate relationship with God but also for the relationship which his disciples had learned from him to cultivate, individually and in fraternal communion, with God who called them to holiness no less than he called their Founder.

It is thus not too surprising that the *parole-force* chosen by Miguel Campos for this particular stage in the Saint's pilgrimage is a document not written by John Baptist, but written to him by the Brothers whom he had trained to see things in that spirit of faith which was his to such a high degree. The wording of the letter which a group of "principal Brothers" sent to him from Paris in his self-imposed isolation in the south was so much a reflection of his own understanding of his vocation and of theirs that it spoke directly to his conscience and moved him to return to his disciples who had felt themselves orphaned by his withdrawal. But there was a further positive decision involved in his return: he must, he now realised

more surely than ever, efface himself definitively, even though now residing once more at the heart of his Society; he must do so in order to ensure, before his death, such a consolidation of the “body of the Society” (in the name of which the Brothers had “ordered” him to return) as would enable it to assume firm responsibility for its future, independently of his own presence or, after his death, of any need for extraneously-imposed authority.

As a supplementary *parole-force* for this final phase, Campos studies certain additions made by the Founder to the 1705 version of the *Règles Communes* when the members of the 1717 general assembly requested him to make a definitive revision of the text.

Such, in outline, is the programme proposed by Brother Miguel for his study of St John Baptist de La Salle’s “gospel-inspired itinerary”. An examination of the historical basis and substance of each of the four chosen *événements-clefs*, together with a study of the interpretation of each made possible by the related *paroles-force* forms the materials of the first of the two volumes which constitute the Campos thesis. The end product of his scholarly investigation is a new “reading” of the life of the Founder – new in the sense that it is not the reading with which we are perforce familiar from the model established by Blain and followed by subsequent biographers. This, of course, is not to imply the absurd suggestion that Blain has been in some sense discarded. As Campos says more than once in his introductory pages, Blain’s work remains the principal and indispensable source for any study of John Baptist de La Salle. And, in fact, Blain’s name appears, either in text or in foot-note, on most of the 389 pages of Volume One of the thesis.

But other names also appear quite frequently – for, in the first place, Campos must establish the historical authenticity of the facts reported by Blain, with reference particularly to the four *événements-clefs* which form the object of his enquiry. Thus, Bernard and Maillefer, the two biographers who put pen to paper even before Blain, are frequently invoked to monitor statements made by the latter and sometimes to supply information lacking from, or only obliquely referred to, in his pages. The critical approach to the facts of the Founder’s life represented by the first Volume of Georges Rigault’s *Histoire Générale de l’Institut des Frères des Écoles Chrésiennes* is given due weight. Br. Léon de Marie Aroz’s researches into documentation relating to the Founder and hidden for nearly three

centuries in the Rheims and other municipal archives are likewise laid under contribution. The historical background to many of Blain's biographical details is filled in by reference to Br. Yves Poutet's two-volume work *Le XVIIe Siècle et les Origines Lasalliennes*. (1970). And other Lasallian scholars against whose studies and interpretations the statements of Blain are tested are Maurice-Auguste Hermans and Michel Sauvage.

So much, then, for the mere historicity of Canon Blain's information. Having established that, Miguel Campos seeks to interpret the facts, not by an uncritical acceptance of Blain's edifying conjectures but by examining the documents which Campos believes are guides to the Founder's own understanding of the events. What emerges, then, from the thesis is a new comprehension of the life and achievements of St John Baptist de La Salle – or, at any rate, of certain salient episodes or periods in that life. Not, Campos emphasises, a new biography, but a contribution, he would hope, towards the eventual critical biography of the Founder which one day must, and no doubt will, be written.

## 2

### *Prelude to a Mission*

It is basic to the Campos thesis that John Baptist de La Salle was a man whose whole existence came to be dedicated to the service of God, but that such dedication developed from a recognition of God's will for him perceived, step by step, in the unfolding events of his life. It was not, so to speak, the result of a heavenly visitation or a dramatic prevenience of grace. His zeal for God's glory belongs to the same category as that of St Paul (whose life and letters became a dominant influence in his life) but there was no Damascus experience in John Baptist's existence. A simple, and apparently fortuitous, contact with a group of unlikely-looking schoolmasters was the identifiable point from which he was led to founding a religious institute which, certainly in quantitative terms, has been second to none in bringing the good news of salvation to the young, especially the impoverished and underprivileged young.

The progressive growth of John Baptist's realisation that this momentous task was what God called him to constitutes the first of the *événements-clefs* we are to study and it will be the purpose of this chapter to show that his mission was prepared for (without his being aware of it at the time) by his recognition and acceptance of God's will in the successive circumstances of his early life. He did not (Campos shows) seek to be the founder of an Order – far from it. What he did seek was to follow the beckoning finger of God's right hand, and by the time he reached (if the term may be allowed) his moment of truth, the moment, namely, of recognising his vocation as Founder of the Christian Schools, it was too late to draw back. But there was, in any case, never any question of his drawing back at that watershed point in his life. He had become too habituated to saying yes to whatever, small or great, he believed the Lord was asking him for.

Miguel Campos begins by relating in outline the significant historical data ascertainable about the Founder's life prior to his moment of recognising what was to be his life's work. And appropriately his starting point is John Baptist's birth and childhood, since the influences of the family into which he was born and of the

cultural ambience in which he was brought up had much to do with the orientation of his mature and adult life. Léon de Marie Aroz has discussed (in *Cahier Lasallien No. 26*) the doubts that have been put forward regarding the traditional date and place of the Founder's birth, but settles in favour of the tradition – 30 April 1651 at the Hôtel de la Cloche in Rheims. Aroz also amplifies with documentary evidence the scant details which the early biographers provided about the profession and personality of John Baptist's father, Louis de La Salle. Campos is satisfied to refer his readers to the relevant pages of Aroz's discussion, but in fact the effect of following up this cross-reference is to establish from the beginning of one's study the principle which is to guide Campos throughout his lengthy thesis – the principle that the reality of John Baptist de La Salle's discovery and acceptance of his life's mission must be sought in the verifiable circumstances that history, not hagiography, will reveal.

The Institute has cherished the tradition that its Founder was of noble birth, not from any trivial motive of snobbery, but because the measure of his heroic self-sacrifice is thereby accentuated. His nobility, in fact, came from his mother, Nicole Moët, daughter of Jean Moët, Seigneur de Brouillet, who was godfather when John Baptist was baptised on the day of his birth at the parish church of Saint-Hilaire. On his father's side, John Baptist came from well-to-do merchant stock. His lineal ancestry is traced by Aroz, with genealogical charts and descriptive profiles, back to the merchant draper, Menault de La Salle, conducting a thriving business at Soissons in the 15th century. It was John Baptist's father, Louis, who discontinued the family business and embarked upon a legal career, eventually ranking as Counsellor of the King and functioning as magistrate at the Presidial Court of Rheims. Blain speaks of Louis's "*deep Christian spirit*" and Bernard mentions his "*great piety*" while Maillefer dwells on the assiduous care with which he fostered in his eldest son, John Baptist, the virtuous disposition which manifested itself from earliest childhood. The general picture of Louis de La Salle, thus derived from the first biographers of his son, has remained sketchy and indistinct, but the researches of Brother Aroz have amplified the historical data in abundant fashion. It would take us too far from our theme even to try to summarise Aroz's findings, but it can be said that nothing in them contradicts – but rather that all confirms – the edifying impression the first biographers have left of this wise, conscientious, cultured man of the world who was also

devout in his religious practice and detached from the wealth he had inherited.

John Baptist grew up in a sheltered family circle but at the same time in contact with the social environment of his class. Of his very earliest studies nothing is known. The first probable date in this connection is 10 October 1661 (he was already ten and a half years old therefore) when he was enrolled at the Collège des Bons Enfants, his father's old school, at Rheims. From then until 1669 other places than his home and other persons than his family were to contribute their influence to the shaping of his mind and character. One such person, emerging on the scene of John Baptist's life as early as 1662 was Pierre Dozet, a cousin of Louis, Vicar General of the Archdiocese of Rheims and Chancellor of the University of that city, who arranged for the 11-year old boy to receive the tonsure from the auxiliary Bishop of Clermont. It was Pierre Dozet also who, four years later, resigned his canonry in favour of his young cousin whose progress in studies and maturity of character had greatly impressed him. These two initiatives on Dozet's part suggest that he must have had a significant influence on John Baptist's decision to be a priest, but there is no documentary evidence to support this surmial.

It is likewise difficult to specify the precise motives which induced John Baptist's family to encourage this aspiration. Bernard, Maillefer and Blain all concur in attributing their consent to the deep faith of the parents. How their eldest son himself was led to perceive the beginnings of a call to the priesthood can only be conjectured, but it is a safe assumption that the Christian spirit inculcated in the boy by his parents, the beneficent influence of the Collège des Bons Enfants and the example of his distinguished relative, Pierre Dozet, were potent factors.

Yet such influences do not alone suffice to explain the early awakening of this vocation. For an eldest son to express an option for the ecclesiastical state was to make demands on a family's spirit of self-sacrifice. And although in the young De La Salle's case, the solid Christian basis of his upbringing favoured the development of his vocation, paradoxically the social ambience in which he grew up had sufficient attractions to make it necessary for him to exert personal efforts to persevere in his aspiration. His succession to a canonry of Rheims at the age of not quite sixteen represented, in the words of Maillefer, a "*stumbling-block*" for him, adolescent as he was and beginning to "*breathe the air of liberty*". An unordained candidate for

a canonry was required by the Chapter's regulations to express a commitment to the ecclesiastical state and to manifest this commitment by entering at least into minor orders. Maillefer meant that the discipline of the capitular duties could have proved irksome for the boy-canon and have turned him from his progress towards the priesthood – but the biographer supposes this only to say that, in fact, John Baptist easily surmounted the stumbling-block and now “*regarded himself as one consecrated by his canonry to public prayer*”. He certainly accepted the condition of minor orders, receiving all four of these on 17 March 1668, a few weeks short of his seventeenth birthday.

In contrast with Maillefer, Blain seems, in his first reference to John Baptist's canonry, to see no attached problem at all: “*The young De La Salle,*” he says, “*like another Samuel, seemed born for the sacred ministry. He was made for the Church and already his whole ambition was to dedicate himself to an ecclesiastical career. His vocation was clear to see in his every action, in all his inclinations, in the things which pleased and attracted him – everything about him proclaimed that he was destined for the service of the altar . . .*” The canonry, in Blain's interpretation, was an occasion for supreme joy, for John Baptist now “*saw himself free to follow his virtuous inclinations*”. Nevertheless, as if impressed by Maillefer's “*stumbling-block*” inference (he had read the Maurist's first draft of the biography), Blain does expatiate apropos: “*To shake off the yoke of authority is the desire of the young, hostile as they are to all control, all restraint; to be their own masters, to organise their own lives and follow their own opinions . . . in a word, to find their own way to heaven and to follow it only where and how it pleases them to do so – all this constitutes a subtle temptation, not easy to resist for a young man just beginning to breathe the air of liberty*”. But such a temptation, Blain adds, had scant hope of success with an adolescent of John Baptist de La Salle's calibre, veritable model as he was of piety, modesty, assiduity in reciting the divine office, obedience to the rules of the Chapter and industrious application to his studies.

The two biographers differ in their interpretation of the element of risk presented by the early bestowal of the status of canon, but both serve to document the point of immediate interest to us, namely that John Baptist was already conscious of his call to the priesthood and was generous in his response.

His application to study was proved shortly afterwards when on 10 July 1669, he gained the final school diploma of *maitrise-ès-arts* with

the mention *summa cum laude* (the original document is preserved in the Rome archives). Br. Clair Battersby, in his 1957 biography of the Founder, provides a substantial description of the curriculum John Baptist would have had to follow in his progress towards this success; Br. Yves Poutet, in his 1970 study of the 17th century background, presents a still more detailed account of the formidable programme involved. One is left in no doubt that only a combination of mature intelligence and disciplined application could have led to a first-class result at the age of eighteen. It is a fair inference that the young De La Salle's devotion to his studies was a manifestation of his single-minded response to the priestly vocation he sensed within himself, since he proceeded directly to the faculty of theology of the University of Rheims to continue his studies there. Both Maillefer and Blain state that he went directly to Paris from the Bons Enfants, but the Rome archives has two documents attesting John Baptist's "*assiduous attendance*" at courses of theology at the Rheims university, both dated 15 July 1670 – a year, almost to the day, after his graduation at the Collège des Bons Enfants.

Why he then transferred to Paris to continue his theology is not clear and seems somewhat surprising, considering the close family environment in which he had been reared and also the fact that he seems, from the two attestations mentioned above, to have settled well into the Rheims courses. Battersby suggests that the seminary at Rheims, from its proud beginnings as the first to be established in France following the decrees of the Council of Trent, had declined, a century later, in its standards of serious study and no longer commanded general respect. Poutet, on the other hand, attributes the decision to internal unrest existing at the University of Rheims itself at that time. The three source-biographers, making no mention of the year at Rheims, concur in giving, as Louis de La Salle's motive for sending his son to Paris, the high reputation both of the seminary of Saint-Sulpice and that of the University of Paris where the seminarians followed the courses in philosophy and theology. Blain is particularly emphatic on the point, describing Saint-Sulpice as "*a school fertile in the production of scholars and saints, an academy flourishing in piety and in sound doctrine*". For Miguel Campos the interest in the matter is the docility shown by the mature and intellectually-endowed young De La Salle to his parents' wishes which, it is reasonable to surmise, represented for him an expression of God's will and an important step forward in the path of his priestly vocation.

Yves Poutet devotes some 120 pages of his monumental study of the 17th century background to an account of the seminary of Saint-Sulpice as it was when John Baptist, aged nineteen and a half, entered there on 18 October 1670. We are given a detailed account of the regulations and daily timetable then in force and of the spirit of exact obedience with which the seminarists were expected to observe them. A description is also given by Poutet of the routine and prevailing spirit of the Sorbonne University of the time, where the seminarists studied for divinity degrees. Profile sketches are given of fellow-students of John Baptist, four of whom, Colbert, De Brou, De Noailles and Godet des Marais, were to become bishops, three of them figuring importantly in the story of the future Institute of the Christian Schools. The personalities of the theology professors of the Sorbonne are brought to life, particularly two whose lectures John Baptist certainly attended, J. Despériers and G. de Lestocq, noted opponents of Cartesianism and Jansenism. But it is to the staff of the seminary itself that Poutet devotes most of his attention. The Superior at the time of John Baptist's entry was Alexandre de Bretonvilliers, first successor of the founder of the Community and Seminary of Saint-Sulpice. Olier had set the ideal of the seminarists as the imitation of Christ carried as near as possible to the point of identification. Conditions of entry were strict and it was Bretonvilliers who judged the young De La Salle to have the qualities to aspire to that ideal. The deputy superior was Louis Tronson and his influence on John Baptist is summarised by Poutet as a conviction that "a regular life is a condition of priestly perfection, that fidelity to little things is more pleasing to God than occasional acts of heroism, that recourse to a spiritual director is necessary for anyone who wishes to advance in the spiritual life, that the grace of priesthood imposes an obligation of ardent zeal for the salvation of souls and that a truly Christian life will remain unattainable without fervent mental prayer and frequent examinations of conscience".

The pervading spirit of the seminary was, in fact, one of prayer and self-denial, but a strong apostolic current was present also in the form of a catechetical revival, started by M. Olier when he came, in 1642, to take charge of the parish of Saint-Sulpice. He had found the parish in a spiritually run-down condition, thanks to the influence of Calvinism and Jansenism, and he saw the chief hope of renewal in ensuring catechetical instruction through the seminarists, for whose use he provided two catechetical manuals. Though John Baptist

cannot fail to have participated in this work, Miguel Campos is cautious about its influence on the shape of his future career. The available evidence for this, he says, is extremely tenuous. Undoubtedly the contact it afforded with the world from which his previous sheltered existence had kept him apart, alerted him to needs hitherto unsuspected, especially perhaps the needs of the children of the poor. But there is no evidence to suggest that this experience, as catechist, of contact with the poor introduced any new element to his prospect of becoming a worthy priest in the cultural milieu of his upbringing.

Maillefer, indeed, summarises the entire stay at Saint-Sulpice with the statement that John Baptist profited by it “*to reflect seriously on his future commitment and especially on the fact that the time was approaching when he must take the irrevocable step of the sub-diaconate*”. The precise nature of the young seminarist’s serious reflections must remain a matter for conjecture but, says Campos, what Maillefer’s phrase suggests is not at all the incidence of any doubts about the path to be followed, but rather the impression of a young man not given to acting under the impulse of sentiment or youthful idealism. John Baptist, approaching the point of a definitive option for the priesthood – the sub-diaconate – pondered the implications and made a deliberate choice.

And it was at this moment that news of his mother’s death, on 19 July 1671, reached him. Maillefer reports the effect of this news somewhat laconically in these terms: “*The blow, severe as it was, did not interrupt his studies, but it did cause him temporarily to suspend his intentions*”. And Blain takes up the latter part of this statement verbatim. However, Maillefer does amplify his brief report with a reflection to the effect that God thus permitted John Baptist to be beset with disturbing doubts in order to accustom him at this early stage in his life to be able to remain calm in the midst of tribulation, of which he was to encounter so much in the course of his life. The implication is that John Baptist *did* “remain calm” even in this first confrontation with personal sorrow. And when we consider the severity of the blow – the loving relationship that existed between such a mother and such a son, shattered when she was only thirty-eight, and so suddenly that there was no warning to enable him even to pay a last visit – we are justified in concluding that he was already seeing, and responding to, the events in his life as manifestations of God’s will, that he was not so precipitately attached to his desire to be

a priest that he could not see that the unforeseen death of his mother might perhaps be an indication that God had other plans for him.

Such self-questioning must have been intensified when, in less than a year – nine months precisely – he learned of the death of his father, whose claims to his respect and affection were no less well founded than had been those of his mother. And Louis' death was also poignantly premature: he was only forty-seven. John Baptist had been at Saint-Sulpice only eighteen months. His progress there had been attested by documents (dated 27 July 1671) certifying his assiduous application to the Sorbonne theology courses on the Blessed Trinity and on the Incarnation, and signed by the two professors mentioned above. But if the death of his mother had made him wonder if, after all, God was calling him to the priesthood, that of his father must have brought him near to seriously doubting that such was the case. He was the eldest son of a large family and the weight of his responsibility must have descended upon him with almost palpable pressure as he pondered, grief-stricken, the implications of his double bereavement.

The attendance at Louis de La Salle's funeral reflected the respect in which he and his family were held in the parochial and social circles of Rheims. We owe our knowledge of the details to the researches of Léon de Marie Aroz. The cortège was led from the family residence in the rue Sainte-Marguerite (to which the De La Salles had moved in 1655 from the Hôtel de la Cloche) by eighteen torch-bearing acolytes. The Presidial Court was present in strength to mark their esteem of a distinguished colleague. The Cathedral Canons likewise attended, marking the fact that the deceased was related to more than one member of their Chapter. The clergy of several other Rheims parishes were in attendance, as well as representative members of the local communities of Augustinians, Carmelites, Franciscans, Dominicans and Minims. The three naves of the church were quite full of mourners. Absent was the new head of the family, John Baptist, since the burial of his father took place, according to the accepted custom, on the morning following the decease. We may surmise that this heart-breaking circumstance was accepted by the absent seminarist as a supplementary sacrifice asked of him by God (as had been also the similar impossibility of attending his mother's funeral for the same reason).

Louis de La Salle's death had occurred after only two days' illness.

What the nature of the illness was is not known, though the names of the three doctors who were successively summoned to his bedside on the 8th and 9th April 1672 have come down in a relevant document. The gravity of the attack was accurately diagnosed since on the 8th Louis accepted advice to dictate his will, cancelling in the process one which he had drawn up jointly with his wife twenty-one years earlier. Léon Aroz has published the 1672 will in facsimile in *Cahier Lasallien No. 26* and a perusal of it is a moving experience not least because it induces a sense of nearness to the Founder at an early moment in his life which can be fairly described as critical. The extract which is of immediate interest in this connection reads as follows in literal translation: “*Likewise, the said Testator names as guardian of his children the venerable and discreet person, Master John Baptist de La Salle, his son, Canon of the Cathedral of Our Lady of Rheims, with the provision that he acts only with the advice and consent of Madame Perrette Lespagnol, widow of the late John Moët . . .*” The names of three other relatives here follow who, together with Madame Lespagnol, John Baptist’s maternal grandmother, were to form a kind of family council to whom the young guardian would turn for advice and approval of the measures he would take.

Despite this clause about the advisory council (influenced no doubt by the fact that at twenty-one John Baptist was still four years below the legal majority age of twenty-five) the document bears implicit testimony to the maturity of character already attained by the young De La Salle. His father confidently leaves in his hands the care of the other six children – Marie, aged 18, Rose-Marie 16, Jacques-Joseph 14, Jean-Louis 8, Pierre 6 and Jean-Remy, a baby not yet two years old. More significantly for our purpose, the will was evidently seen by the appointed guardian as a directive of Providence. His response was to take immediate measures for terminating his studies at Saint-Sulpice whence he took his departure on 19 April 1672.

The researchers of Br. Aroz have made it possible for us to appreciate the conscientious exactitude and methodical efficiency the young guardian brought to his task, both characteristics tempered by down-to-earth good sense and an innate kindness of heart. The unexpected load of responsibility cannot have been congenial to him, absorbed as he had been in his studies and totally contented with the sheltered life of the seminary. But a detailed account of his receipts and expenditure covering the first four years of his

guardianship, and filling four volumes of the *Cahiers Lasalliens* series (*Compte de Tutelle: C.L. Nos. 28-31*) bears unquestionable witness to his wholehearted acceptance. One of his first tasks, expeditiously completed, was to pay the bills arising from his father's illness and from the funeral arrangements. Another was to draw up inventories of the family possessions and of his father's papers. The financial statements are what one might expect from an accountant rather than a theological student. But various entries manifest a warmth and considerateness not at all corroborative of the impression one might draw from the pages of Blain of a somewhat austere, youthful martinet, running his household rather on the lines of a 17th century seminary.

One would like to dwell more on this hitherto little-explored area of De La Salle's life. The details provided by the Aroz documents are fascinating in themselves and serve very well to underpin Campos's concept that John Baptist found his way to holiness and to his life's work by a total and generous response to God's successive calls perceived in the changing circumstances of his life. Campos reflects as follows on the implications of the twenty-one year old seminarist's new status as "chef de famille": "He is revealed as a practical-minded man ready to take up his new responsibilities with all that they entailed. The suspension of his plans for the priesthood is not to be interpreted as a doubt about where his vocation lay, but rather as a proof that his dominant concern was to know and submit to the Lord's will for him. The needs of his family now took priority over the pursuit of his vocation because it seemed that that was how God wanted it."

Yet, as Campos implies, John Baptist saw no compelling reason to believe that God now wished him to abandon his aspirations to the priesthood. The contentment and progress that had marked his brief stay at the Paris seminary were for him signs which could not be discounted without violence precisely to his openness to God's will. In Maillefer's words: "*The multiplicity of his tasks as guardian which now divided his attention did not efface from his mind the idea he had formed at Saint Sulpice of committing himself irrevocably to the ecclesiastical state.*" And Blain conveys the same assurance, though in more exalted terms: "*His own master now, owner of his father's rich patrimony, completely free still to choose between a career in the world and the service of the altar, he was merely delighted to have to make his choice all over again . . . He felt joy at being free only to savour the opportunity of ratifying,*

*now at a mature age, the consecration he had already made of himself to God's service from his boyhood."*

Nevertheless, the term "quandary" which Maillefer uses to describe John Baptist's new situation is appropriate. If God wished him to be responsible for the care of his orphaned brothers and sisters but at the same time wished him to persevere in his desire to become a priest, how could the two calls be reconciled? His brief stay at Saint-Sulpice had taught him the value of seeking advice from competent guides, and he turned now, in his dilemma, to Nicolas Roland – a choice which was to have consequences far beyond the reach of the immediate problem which had occasioned his recourse to him.

Roland's part in John Baptist de La Salle's life and vocation was so considerable that Léon de Marie Aroz has dedicated the whole of Volume 38 of the *Cahiers Lasalliens* – a book of 386 pages – to a study of the subject. The learned and zealous Canon Roland may have become first acquainted with John Baptist when, as Canon Theologian of the Rheims Chapter, he had the duty of instructing any younger members of the Chapter not yet ordained priests. He was well-known for his concern for the reform of the French clergy and was at the forefront of this work in his native city of Rheims. He knew the calibre of the young man who now approached him for advice at what the biographers describe as a cross-roads in his life. Roland's response was that John Baptist must by no means abandon his purpose of becoming a priest, that he must somehow reconcile this purpose with the duties that had befallen him as guardian. The advice quite surely accorded with John Baptist's own deepest aspirations and he, in Blain's words, "*no longer postponed the decisive step of engaging himself in the ecclesiastical state by a perpetual bond*". Under Roland's guidance he set himself to prepare for the subdiaconate which, on the feast of Pentecost 1672, he received at Cambrai.

With reference to this particular period in De La Salle's life, the source-biographers stress especially their hero's docility in accepting the advice of his spiritual director, but Miguel Campos believes that their emphasis requires modification. John Baptist, in responding to the advice he received, related it to his personal reflections on the dual nature of God's summons to him. His deepest wish, it may be taken as certain, was to return to Paris and continue his studies at the Sorbonne, and he might have been tempted to see Canon Roland's advice as approbation for such a step, leaving the affairs of the family

in the hands of the counsellors nominated for him in his father's will. But such a facile solution would have been at variance with his personal conviction that God's will was no less present in his duties of guardianship than in his wish to be a priest, a wish now reinforced by the assurances of such a spiritual guide as Nicolas Roland.

The solution he adopted was to seek admission to the University of Rheims where, within a few months, he gained his first degree in theology. He combined these studies with continued meticulous attention to the care of his brothers and sisters and this (as Campos stresses) in the manner and style befitting the social status of the family. In a word, his considered response to the seemingly irreconcilable calls upon his energy and good-will was to bring to both tasks the utmost effort and efficiency.

Evidence of this in relation to his guardianship is clearly to be seen in documents attesting journeys made between 1673 and 1676 to Beaurieux, Guyencourt, La Neuville and Gueux, to Saint Quentin (to recover arrears of a debt owed to the family by a convent of nuns there) and to Villette-près-Fismes (to inspect a mill there belonging to the family). An unsuccessful legal case is attested for this period (13 March 1675) in a territorial dispute with a monastery at Chartreuve. And on 22 August of the same year he acquired a house in the rue Sainte-Marguerite, additional to the one he and his family had occupied since 24 June 1665.

Evidence of his perseverance in his intention to be a priest is provided by his ordination to the diaconate on 21 March 1676. The biographers place also at this point in his career an initiative, inspired by Canon Roland, to effect an exchange of his canonry for the future care of a parish. According to Maillefer, Roland wished to have his young disciple serve the Church in a more demanding way than the sheltered life of a canon would require. John Baptist apparently saw in this suggestion of Roland's a sign of God's will, and he co-operated in the rather complex negotiations Roland put in hand. An opportunity for such an exchange was provided by the wish of a Rheims parish priest, André Clocquet, Curé of Saint-Pierre-le-Vieil, to exchange the burden of pastoral care for a more tranquil and contemplative way of life. When the matter eventually came before the Archbishop, Maurice Le Tellier, for his approval, it received a negative response, with the advice to both applicants "*to remain in the respective vocations to which God had called them*".

About this episode Blain says (without specifying details) that

certain relatives of John Baptist, alarmed at the proposed exchange, had made approaches to the Archbishop, predisposing him to withhold approval. Both Maillefer and Blain report that, whatever the reason for the refusal, John Baptist accepted it without demur and that, in fact, it endorsed "*an interior voice which told him that he was not called to have charge of a parish*". Aroz devotes several pages to a discussion of this episode in the early life of the Founder and, in the light of documents he has unearthed, rectifies information and perspectives which are faulty in the accounts of all three biographers, whilst endorsing the historicity of what in itself has seemed an unlikely eventuality. Miguel Campos reports the facts in summary, seeing in them further confirmation of his theme that John Baptist responded in all tranquillity to occurrences in his life which, however unexpected, he read as God's will for him. When Nicolas Roland had advised him to consider exchanging the easy life of a canon for that of a parish priest, he acquiesced because he believed that the saintly Roland was voicing God's will. When Archbishop Le Tellier (no saint himself if Madame de Sévigné's anecdote about him, quoted by Battersby in his 1957 biography, is to be believed) withheld his approval, John Baptist thought no more about the matter, believing that such an insuperable obstacle proved that Roland's idea was not, after all, in line with God's will. Campos reflects briefly on the impressive qualities of John Baptist's character which emerge from this episode: discretion, absence of precipitation, practical commonsense – with, nevertheless, an openness to the interplay of events. Roland's attitude seems, in contrast, to be marked by impulsiveness: Aroz signalises more than one feature of his part in the affair suggesting a readiness to cut corners in getting his spiritual protégé (whose rich potential he had discerned) in charge of a parish – not that any motive other than an excess of zeal for the good of the Church can justly be adduced in the matter.

John Baptist was ordained priest on 9 April 1678, the eve of Easter, just three weeks before his twenty-seventh birthday. The early biographers note that his first Mass, the following day, was offered "*without solemnity*" in the Lady Chapel of the Cathedral of Rheims. Ordination was, for him, a goal achieved, the most momentous happening in his life so far. But events were soon to show that, in God's longer view, it was only a stage in his journey towards his life's work. Within eighteen days of the ordination, Nicolas Roland was dead, prematurely at the age of thirty-five, worn

out by his restless exertions in the cause of good and by his relentless self-denial which left him an easy prey to an epidemic of purple fever. This event was more than a tragic bereavement for John Baptist. It introduced a new orientation into his life, scarcely perceived by him as such at the time, but appreciated retrospectively in later years when he set down his reflections on this period.

For in his will, Roland named John Baptist de La Salle and a certain Nicolas Rogier as his executors, and among the tasks and responsibilities this nomination imposed upon them was that they should endeavour to bring about *“en son lieu et place, l'établissement de la maison et communauté des Filles du Saint Enfant Jésus . . . jusqu'à ce qu'il soit parfait et consommé”*. The Community of the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus, referred to here, was a foundation of Canon Roland aimed at providing free elementary education for poor girls. The reason why Roland had found it necessary to request that the executors of his will should (in the terms quoted above) work for the perfect and complete establishment of his community was that his own efforts had failed to surmount the many obstacles that stood in the way of gaining legal recognition for the foundation. (Léon Aroz, in *Cahier Lasallien* No. 38, has surveyed this area of Lasallian history in greater detail and with ampler documentation than can be found anywhere else, and the story is deeply interesting.)

Discussing the implications for John Baptist of the new responsibilities imposed upon him by Roland's will, Miguel Campos quotes relevant passages from Maillefer and Blain and the resulting contrast illustrates the general differences of approach noticeable in the two biographers. The Maurist comments as follows: *“Whatever difficulty M. de La Salle felt in taking up a burden which seemed so heavy and which, coupled with his domestic responsibilities, would absorb time that he would have preferred to devote to prayer, he believed that the wishes of his deceased friend represented God's will for him. He overcame his repugnance and showed by this act of generosity a clear sign of his generosity to M. Roland. He put all his trust in God and, full of zeal, he applied himself to the task of removing the difficulties which were repeatedly hindering the work of the Holy Child Sisters.”*

The corresponding reflection from Blain reads as follows: *“M. de La Salle sought, during the closing moments of M. Roland's life, to gather up the edifying last words of his spiritual father and to hear from his lips his dying wishes. And, as always, he sensed within himself neither a feeling of repugnance nor one of eagerness, but only the disposition of one who wishes for*

*nothing and at the same time wishes for everything that God asks of him . . . He accepted the responsibility of executor and the care of M. Roland's community without seeing where the hand of God was leading him."*

Campos's reason for quoting these two passages is not, however, primarily to illustrate the contrasting reactions of Maillefer and Blain, but rather to show that the two biographers are at one in implying that at this stage in his life John Baptist had no awareness of his vocation as founder of a teaching congregation. His acceptance – despite a feeling of repugnance (Maillefer) or with no such feeling at all (Blain) – of the executorship was no more than the response of a devout ecclesiastic loyal to the memory of his spiritual director and grateful for the benefits he had received from him. But loyalty and gratitude were sufficient grounds for believing that God's will was in question and this was what concerned John Baptist yet again.

The thoroughness and savoir-faire with which the twenty-seven year old executor addressed himself to his fresh responsibilities can be assessed from documents assembled in *Cahier Lasallien No. 38*. (The other executor, Nicolas Rogier, seems on the evidence to have left the initiatives to his colleague, probably because he himself was, at the age of twenty-four, legally still a minor.) Modern biographers, like Battersby, have shown why the founding of any new religious congregation in the Rheims of that time was a difficult and frustrating task. And Aroz's study makes it clear that Roland had had an uphill and inconclusive struggle to try to give reality to a dream which had first captured his imagination in 1666, twelve years before his death. Although at his death the tiny congregation did exist (the names of its pioneer members are known) it was without legal status of any kind.

Ironically, not until a fortnight after his death did Roland's efforts, helped by an intervention of the Archbishop, bear fruit when a *lettre de cachet* was despatched authorising the king's lieutenant in Rheims to convoke an assembly of dignitaries representing the civic and church interests to consider the case for granting full recognition, by Letters Patent, to the Community of the Holy Child Jesus. This assembly duly took place on 11 August 1678 in the municipal offices of Rheims and (as a copy of the *procès-verbal* informs us) "*Maîtres Jean-Baptiste de La Salle, prestre, chanoine de P'église Nostre-Dame, licencié en theologie de l'Université de Reims, et Nicolas Rogier, diacre, chanoine et théologal en ladite église*" duly appeared to present the case for legal

recognition of the Community founded by the “*defunct Maistre Nicolas Roland prestre, docteur en théologie, chanoine et théologal en ladite église*”. The authorities heard an account of the motives which had led Monsieur Roland to make the foundation, and then studied a full transcription of his will; they were presented with a detailed inventory, drawn up by Monsieur de La Salle, of the goods and property in possession of the Community, and an account of how it was proposed that such possessions would be disposed of if the Community should cease to exist; and finally a list was submitted, as required, of the names of all who had been benefactors of the Sisters.

It must have been a testing experience for the two executors, but the result was a triumph for them: the *procès-verbal* concludes with the information that the authorities concurred in the view that “*the establishment of the said house and community of the Sisters, non-cloistered, of the Holy Child Jesus, for the instruction of poor girls and for bringing them up in the fear of God, as well as for teaching them to read and write, would be to the public advantage*”. Six months later, in February 1679, the long-desired Letters Patent were received; the original precious document is preserved in the Sisters’ Mother House in Rheims.

The way in which John Baptist addressed himself to the tasks devolving upon him as executor of Roland’s will receives due consideration from Miguel Campos because it illustrates his basic theme. The episode, like that of the guardianship, demonstrates the total commitment with which De La Salle applied himself to any undertaking which circumstances imposed upon him and which, therefore, he interpreted as an expression of God’s will. It also illustrates his capacity for swift but careful collation and systematisation of factual information, as well as an assured ability, at the age of twenty-seven, to conduct delicate negotiations with civic and ecclesiastical officials, individually and in assembly. And it also, of course, exemplifies what Frère Bernard, in the apt title he gave to the first biography of the Founder, called “*the admirable conduct of divine Providence*” towards John Baptist de La Salle – who did not know that when he was carrying out his tasks as executor of Nicolas Roland’s will, and working with sureness of touch for the “*perfect and complete establishment*” of Roland’s teaching congregation, he was, in Providence’s plan, serving a sort of apprenticeship for a greater mission to come.

### 3

## *How The Institute Began*

Considering the strikingly effective role played by John Baptist de La Salle in securing the legal recognition of Canon Roland's congregation of teaching sisters, it must seem, at first glance, surprising that it was not he who was appointed to succeed Roland as ecclesiastical superior of the nuns, but one William Rogier, parish priest of Mouzon, an elder brother of the Nicolas Rogier who was co-executor with John Baptist of Roland's will. But, in fact, the Constitutions of the new Congregation stipulated that the Superior should be at least thirty-five years of age, and William Rogier was just that while Canon de La Salle was only twenty-eight. John Baptist himself clearly saw nothing untoward in this appointment of someone else: he remained in close touch with the Congregation, often standing in for William Rogier whose duties, as parish priest of distant Mouzon, limited his availability.

It was Canon de La Salle who said Mass for the Sisters each day at their convent in the rue Barbâtre and it was on one such visit that he first met Adrien Nyel – a meeting which the biographers are at one in signalling as an intervention of Providence setting John Baptist on the path of his life's work. The association with the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus had been a preparation for this moment, though John Baptist did not see it as such at the time – we have his own word for that. The work he had had to do to win recognition for the teaching apostolate of the Sisters had obliged him to study closely the arguments favouring the establishment of free schools, had provided the opportunity to meditate on the ideas of Roland concerning this work, and had enabled him to take the measure of the obstacles in the way of making such a foundation and of the procedures most suitable for removing those obstacles. Furthermore, the steps he had in fact successfully taken had brought him into personal contact with the civic and ecclesiastical authorities of Rheims. The moment for his meeting with Nyel was right.

Nyel's presence in Rheims was due to the initiative of a charitable widow of Rouen, Jeanne Dubois de Maillefer, herself a native of Rheims but resident for some years in the Normandy capital where her husband had established a business concern. She greatly admired

the zealous enterprise of a Minim priest, Nicolas Barré, who had founded a congregation of Sisters to provide free education for girls in Rouen, and had attempted, but with ill success, to do something similar for the benefit of poor boys. It was Père Barré's example which inspired Madame de Maillefer with the wish to complement for the underprivileged boys of her native city of Rheims the work which she knew Canon Roland had done for the girls there.

It may be mentioned, in passing, that Léon de Marie Aroz, in *Cahier Lasallien No. 38*, advises caution with regard to the historicity of Blain's account of Madame de Maillefer as a frivolous, worldly pleasure-seeker dramatically converted to a life of penance and charity by the episode of the beggar whom she spurned from her door and who then seemed, *d'outré-tombe*, to refuse the sheet which she had grudgingly allowed to be used for his shroud. The story, says Aroz, lacks objectivity and critical insight: he suggests that a "substitution de personnes" may have taken place in the origin of the story, and refers his readers to the theory of a Frère Leuter who has studied the question. It may perhaps be said in support of this academic question-mark that neither of Blain's predecessors had given any hint of awareness of such a conversion. Bernard's first mention of Madame de Maillefer describes her as "*a virtuous lady who excelled in the practice of virtue (the repetition is Bernard's) and above all in zeal for the instruction of the young*". Significantly, Dom Maillefer, content in the first draft of his biography of his uncle to describe Madame de Maillefer as a lady "*born at Rheims of a rich and distinguished family, who had left her native city to accompany her husband to Rouen where she applied herself unremittingly to practices of piety and works of mercy*", enlarges considerably in his second version (he had read Blain's biography in the meantime) and Jeanne de Maillefer now emerges as "*a lady born at Rheims of rich and pious parents, who had acquired in the bosom of her family a virtuous disposition which prompted her to undertake good works wherever the need arose . . .*" She was "*tender-hearted to the poor and looked on them as her children, making every effort to provide them with whatever assistance, material and spiritual, lay within her means . . .*" When her husband's Rouen venture obliged her to leave Rheims, it was in her new domicile that she "*she devoted herself still more particularly*" to the practice of charity, to such effect that she was soon being referred to as "*the mother of the poor*". Dom Elie pursues this vein for some lines more and it seems possible that his intention is to counter what he believes to be a libel on the memory

of a saintly lady who was, in fact, a glory of his own family. Incidentally, Battersby makes no mention of the “conversion” story; but, as against that, it must be said that it is enshrined in the official History of the Institute, retailed with verve by Georges Rigault on page 89 of Tome I.

Madame de Maillefer’s envoy, Adrien Nyel, is referred to by the Founder’s first biographer, Bernard, as one of whom “*it may be said that God made use of him to give rise to the institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, in so far that it was he who caused Monsieur de La Salle to undertake and accomplish something to which he had given no thought at all . . .*”. Nevertheless it seems fair to say that Nyel’s image has come down to us at something less than life-size. His eagerness to make new foundations, his impatience with the constraining need for consolidation, his self-satisfaction with the mere quantity, as opposed to the quality, of his enterprises – such traits have tended (not unnaturally in biographies of the man who provided their counterpoise and supplied the remedial measures) to obscure the sterling endowments which can self-evidently be claimed for him. Bernard first used the word “*bonhomme*” for him, and the patronising term (defined in Larousse as “a simple-minded man” and in Mansion as “a simple, good-natured man”) has persisted down as far as Rigault who uses it for Nyel on page 139 of his first Tome. The true calibre of the man may be better judged, perhaps, by the impression he made, at a first encounter, on a person of such proved discernment and poise as John Baptist de La Salle – an impression which time did not diminish, since we learn that when, six years later, Nyel decided to leave everything in the hands of De La Salle and return to Rouen, the latter implored him not to depart; and when, less than two years after that, news reached the Founder of the death of his friend and collaborator, he assembled the Rheims communities and their pupils for a Requiem Mass at the Convent of the Holy Child Jesus where he and Nyel had first met.

But even more palpable evidence of Nyel’s qualities is available in what is known of his activities in Rouen before he was invited by the wealthy Madame de Maillefer to extend his zeal to her native city of Rheims. Born in Laon, he migrated to Rouen as a young man and soon gained the friendship and confidence of one of the most influential officials of the Normandy capital, Laurent Le Cornu, seigneur de Bimorel, whose functions included the administration of the *Bureau des Pauvres*. The problem of providing instruction for the

children in care at the *Hôpital Général* was one of Bimorel's concerns and when Nyel offered his services as a teacher Bimorel was sufficiently impressed to appoint him in charge of a class for the workhouse children, together with the duties of bursar. Nyel proved to be a gifted teacher, a highly competent catechist and an energetic worker who spontaneously added to his stipulated duties the provision of lessons for the young apprentices and domestics still dependent on the *Hôpital*. All this, however, was insufficient to satisfy his enthusiasm, and when he suggested to Bimorel the re-opening of certain charity schools which had once functioned in the districts of Saint-Maclou, Saint-Vivien, Beauvoisine and Saint-Eloi, but which had closed for lack of teachers to staff them, Bimorel readily made funds available for the enterprise. He was confident that Nyel could and would recruit and train the needed teachers. Nor was his confidence misplaced: the four charity schools were soon flourishing.

For twenty years Adrien devoted himself to the poor children of Rouen, directing his attention more particularly to the needs of boys since Père Barré had founded his Sisters for the girls. When Jeanne de Maillefer had the idea of doing something for the education of poor boys in Rheims (where Canon Roland's Sisters were providing for the girls) it was not surprising that she turned to Monsieur Nyel for help. Considering the long and taxing labours already accomplished in Rouen, it seems a fair measure of Nyel's quality that he offered to travel to Rheims in person to inaugurate the good work. He was fifty-five at the time, not an age for youthful idealism or the call of adventure. He was well established in Rouen, accustomed to a routine which had developed from his own initiatives and procedures, and he was a respected consultant on matters educational. Now he was undertaking to surrender this settled situation to begin, so to speak, all over again in an unknown city. When all allowance is made for the providential trait in his temperament which conditioned him to welcome challenges, there must have been a deeply apostolic motivation prompting his willingness to further Madame de Maillefer's plan. There were poor boys in Rheims lacking the boon of rudimentary education and here was a devout lady willing to provide financial means towards remedying this need. Of course he would uproot himself and go! He did not realise that he was setting out to meet a saint in the making. But Providence had judged him worthy of the privilege not merely of

meeting a saint but of guiding him, albeit unawares, into the path of his life's work.

It was understood that Adrien's first call, on arriving in Rheims, would be to the Convent of the Holy Child in the rue Barbâtre. The superior there, Françoise Duval, had herself been sent from Rouen by Père Barré with whom she had collaborated in the establishing of a school in the northern city, becoming, in fact, the first superior of the pioneer community of school-mistresses founded by Barré at Sotteville. The Minim's choice of her, with Anne Lecoecur, to go to Rheims to assist Canon Roland's enterprise, is convincing evidence of his personal esteem for Roland and especially of his disinterested zeal for the educational work the Rheims canon was struggling to establish. Françoise knew Madame de Maillefer well. Sisters from the Sotteville convent had staffed Père Barré's second foundation at Darnétal which Madame de Maillefer had financed. And there were other links between the two zones of apostolic activity, that of Rouen and that of Rheims. Canon Roland had twice visited Rouen and had become acquainted with the work of Père Barré there. Jeanne de Maillefer knew about Roland's enterprise in Rheims and also about the key part her relative, Canon de La Salle, had played therein. The latter had had no occasion to visit Rouen but it is reasonable to suppose that he had heard much, both from Roland himself and subsequently from Soeur Duval, about the excellent work accomplished in the northern town by the devoted trio of collaborators, Barré, Madame de Maillefer and Nyel. And when Madame de Maillefer was briefing Nyel for his mission to Rheims, and handing him her letter for Soeur Duval, it seems unlikely that she made no mention of her cousin, Canon de La Salle.

In view of such considerations, it may seem strange that when Adrien and John Baptist happened to arrive at the same moment at the door of the rue Barbâtre convent on 15th March 1679, neither seems to have had any inkling of the identity of the other. But all the biographers signalise the element of coincidence in this encounter. The first to record the meeting is Frère Bernard whose account runs thus: "*(Monsieur Nyel), having called on this superior~~s~~ to speak to her about the reason for his coming to this city, it happened, by an effect of divine Providence that when Monsieur Nyel was about to enter the house of the Sisters, Monsieur de La Salle arrived at the same moment, neither being acquainted with the other, and so, without exchanging a word, they went, one to the parlour, the other to his accustomed part of the house . . .*"

Maillefer strikes the same note: “By an intervention (*coup*) of Providence, M. de La Salle who, in accordance with the intentions of M. Roland, took particular care of this community, found himself at the door of the house just when M. Nyel was entering . . .” Georges Rigault (who however indicates on his previous page that Madame de Maillefer’s instructions to Nyel included the advice to consult Canon de La Salle) dramatises the incident in his attractive manner thus: “Le bonhomme Nyel et son petit compagnon courent, sans le savoir, vers l’un de ceux qui auront pitié de la foule. Ils le rencontrent au seuil de la maison fondée par le chanoine Roland. M. de La Salle entre chez les Soeurs en même temps que les deux étrangers. Les saluts ont été échangés en silence. Ni le prêtre ni le maître d’école ne se connaissent. La minute s’écoule, inaperçue. Et la voici pourtant fixée dans l’histoire.” Providential chance in that encounter is indeed built into Lasallian history and one is led to conclude that when Nyel arrived at the rue Barbâtre that March day and handed his letter of explanation to Soeur Duval, his visit and the information he brought were the first intimation the superior had of the specific project for which her interest was now being solicited.

Miguel Campos (who, it should be said, has no hesitation himself in using the word “fortuitous” to describe the encounter in question) notes that when Sister Duval introduced Nyel to Canon de La Salle, the dialogue, as reported by the biographers, assumed a one-sided character. We are given little more of the conversation than a résumé of John Baptist’s advice and suggestions to the visitor from Rouen. But Yves Poutet, who devotes half a dozen pages to a study of Nyel’s work in Rouen, suggests, in synopsis, the content of the conversation as it might have been in its earlier stage, and Campos quotes the relevant passage from Poutet: “Coming from Rouen, Nyel obviously had the Rouen school situation in mind: charity schools closely dependent on the *Hôpital général*, enjoying the approval of the Archbishop of Rouen, the Cathedral Chapter, the Aldermen, the Councillors . . . and the administrators of the social services. In this first interview with De La Salle he began to realise how different the situation was in Rheims. He learned that the almshouses feared a reduction in contributions to themselves from public funds as soon as any new charitable enterprise was put forward. The aldermen and the officials of the presidial court, defenders of the interests of the commercial middle-classes, begrudged the emergence of any community likely to occupy valuable business property . . . Nyel’s experience had been different:

he had opened schools successively at the *Hôpital général* and in the four districts of the city, then in the nearby town of Darnetal; he had recruited, trained and organised schoolmasters . . .”

In other words, John Baptist was able to derive from this first conversation with Nyel a clear impression that the procedures which had proved suitable in Rouen would have no hope of succeeding in Rheims. He showed Nyel that his project called for the utmost discretion and he demonstrated his conviction of this by spontaneously offering the visitor the hospitality of his own home. Madame de Maillefer’s intention had been that Adrien should reside with her brother, Monsieur Dubois, still living in Rheims. But John Baptist pointed out that to go there would certainly raise questions about the purpose of his presence in Rheims, considering the discrepancy between his social status and that of M. Dubois. Clerics passing through Rheims were sometimes accommodated at the De La Salle home; Nyel’s stay there would pass relatively unnoticed. The offer of hospitality was enhanced also by an undertaking to seek for Nyel’s project the interest of influential people likely to be favourably disposed.

Maillefer also says at this point that the young Canon felt that he would have to consult certain “enlightened persons” on the matter, this because of his humble mistrust of his own views. But Blain, despite his ever-present purpose of edification, puts the stress on John Baptist’s personal conviction that Adrien Nyel’s project must not be allowed to fail. At the same time, however, the biographer gives as the reason for this conviction the desire of Canon de La Salle to honour the memory of his deceased friend Canon Roland, whose zeal for the education of the poor would, he felt sure, have included that of boys as well as girls if time had been granted him. Campos quotes the passage from Blain: *“Having read Madame de Maillefer’s letter, and having heard M. Nyel’s explanation, M. de La Salle recognised the importance, indeed the necessity, and advantages, of what was proposed. He conceived a desire for its success, though he foresaw the difficulties and frustrations that would be involved. Everything that M. Roland had wished for would be achieved if this enterprise were to succeed. M. de La Salle felt it a kind of duty to support it. He owed it to the memory of his saintly deceased friend to render this service which, moreover, his goodness of heart would not let him refuse.”*

It is at this point in his thesis that Miguel Campos turns his attention to the first of the *paroles-force* to which, as has been

indicated in our first chapter, he attaches paramount importance as indexes to the mind of the Founder at various stages of his spiritual journey. In introducing his discussion of the lost document relating specifically to the origins of the Institute (the one now referred to as the *Memoir of the Beginnings*) he warns his readers that not all the passages he will cite have the same critical value. Both Bernard and Maillefer, he points out, describe the conversation between De La Salle and Nyel without claiming to quote a document. But the information they provide on the subject, so far as it goes, is substantially of a piece with the more ample details which Blain represents as the actual words (or, more precisely, as *almost* the actual words) used by De La Salle.

A first example of this latter usage of Blain is his presentation of the counsel given to Nyel at the first meeting and cited by the biographer in quotation marks as John Baptist's own words:

*"It will be in vain," said M. de La Salle in so many words (à peu près) to M. Nyel, 'for you to have taken so many steps to come and establish free Christian schools in Rheims if, as your final step, you go to lodge with Madame de Maillefer's brother. If you do that you will make your purpose public and in so doing you will doom it to failure. How could you lodge with him and not arouse suspicion as to your object in coming to Rheims? Your social condition and your work are so different from those of your would-be kind host that it would be sure to be asked why you are residing with him, what motive you had in coming . . . However firmly you keep your counsel, people will pry into your business and follow you around and watch where you go; and when they know what you are about they will put every obstacle in your way. Let the past be your guide to the future. Quite recently, a devout Canon, a theologian of repute, well-thought of, revered even, in this city, established a community of schoolmistresses. At one stage it seemed likely to be wrecked almost at its inception. It was about to perish when only the authority of M. Le Tellier saved it from ruin; all his influence was required, and it was just sufficient, to counter the authority of the town council, or rather to win the approval of that body. Will they give their approval to another foundation, this time for boys? The welfare of the poor of this city would certainly warrant it, but are not God's interests and those of the poor almost always subject to political considerations? To enable the former to prevail on this occasion all the power of the Archbishop would be required, but would he be willing to use it a second time, not to say put it at risk, with the chance of failure?"*

*“‘Come,’ he added, in his gracious manner, ‘Come and stay at my home. The house often lodges rural clergy or other clerical friends of mine. It would be just right for you and would keep your purpose from public notice. You have something of the look of a country clergyman, and that’s what people will take you for. And anyway, being free to offer the hospitality of my house to whomsoever I wish, I am not concerned about what people will think, and anything they may say worries me not at all. You may stay a week with me, resting and unknown, with no one bothering about you. This will give you time to reflect at greater length, to plan what you have to do and to take measures to ensure success. At the end of that time you can make your desired pilgrimage to Our Lady of Liesse and then on your return make a start on your first opening.’”*

Blain further details (again placing the words in quotation-marks, as if actually spoken by John Baptist) the plan proposed by Canon de La Salle to the group of clergy whom he consulted about Nyel’s project:

*“‘The surest means,’ he told them, ‘perhaps the only means, to ensure a sound beginning for the enterprise of free Christian schools for boys is to keep it clear of obstructions by placing it under the care of a parish priest zealous enough to accept responsibility for it, discreet enough to avoid publicising it and generous enough to sustain it. Since a parish priest has the right to provide instruction for his parishioners, and has the authority, as their pastor, to give them masters capable of teaching them Christian doctrine, no one will be in a position to hinder him.’*

*“‘The parish priest of Saint-Symphorien,’ continued our pious Canon, ‘the first of the four who have been suggested, would be the man we are looking for if he were in good standing with his superiors, but unfortunately they do not think well of him, and therefore we cannot consider him. The second is lacking in judgment. The third is the nephew of M. l’Official to whom he owes his position and all else, and to whom he is very devoted, and at a word from this benefactor his uncle, he would send the schoolmasters packing; we must not therefore make him our choice.’”*

The consultative group, continues the biographer, saw the force of these objections and readily agreed to the choice suggested by M. de La Salle himself, namely the parish priest of Saint-Maurice, M. Dorigny by name. We next see the young Canon personally approaching M. Dorigny and putting the proposal to him: Blain again purports to give the words used by John Baptist:

“‘The only condition requested of you in this transaction,’ added the pious Canon, ‘is to accept the role of initiator of this school and to place it under your own name. Almost all your parishioners are poor and you owe them instruction that they are incapable of obtaining for themselves. You will provide it by means of M. Nyel and his young colleague whom we are offering you as teachers for your school. Take them as your own appointees and, should the need arise, claim that you have put them to work for the benefit of your parishioners.’”

Miguel Campos accepts that it is hazardous to pronounce definitively on the authenticity of these quoted passages as coming from the *Memoir of the Beginnings*. Maillefer is silent on the details of what John Baptist is supposed to have said on these occasions. Bernard reports the essence of the information but in the form of narrative. Blain himself does not claim to be quoting from the *Memoir*, but he does attribute the spoken words to M. de La Salle himself, introducing from time to time a formula to that effect, as it will have been noticed. It is significant, however, that Blain seems to disclaim *verbatim* transmission by his use of the introductory phrase “. . . he said in so many words . . . (. . . dit-il à peu près. . .”).

But if the quoted discourses were merely inventions of Blain, two facts would be difficult to explain. The first of these would be the accuracy of the details of events which had taken place some forty years before Blain began to record them and about which he could have had no other source of information than the *Memoir* (the very earliest masters had long died or left the Institute before he began to write). And in the second place, some of the personal comments attributed in the quoted passages to De La Salle are not at all in keeping with the apologetic and edifying purpose of Blain’s biography as a whole – the comments, for example, about the unhappy relationship between the parish priest of Saint-Symphorien and his superiors, and those about the unnamed cleric who was “‘lacking in judgement” and about the obsequious nephew of M. l’Official.

It is true that these two otherwise puzzling facts do not of themselves prove that Blain’s quotations had their origin in the *Memoir of the Beginnings*. For one thing, the style of the quoted discourses seems hardly the same as that of other documents authoritatively ascribed to De La Salle. The first of the passages quoted above, for example, has rhetorical overtones uncharacteristic of John Baptist’s writings. Nor do the protestations that he cares

little for what people will say about Nyel's presence in his home, since he is free to invite whomsoever he wishes, ring authentic.

But such arguments are not conclusive and Campos states his considered opinion that, in the quoted passages purporting to give (approximately) John Baptist's words, Blain was utilising the manuscript, penned by the Founder, first used by Frère Bernard, and, in due course, passed on to Blain when the latter was commissioned to write the official biography. Campos is hopeful that Lasallian studies still in the future will be able to isolate Blain's additions to and modifications of the original text, but considers that, even without guarantees of the integrity of his quotations, it is possible to draw certain conclusions from the passages.

One such is that the information contained in them derives from the mind of someone who was convinced of the usefulness of free Christian schools for the poor and who, moreover, was familiar with the situation in the city of Rheims about the year 1678-79. His knowledge of that situation was not abstract or speculative: he refers to parishes and to individual persons like the parish priests, the Archbishop, the civic authorities, with the assurance of one who had had personal dealings with them. Such knowledge cannot have been possessed by Canon Blain himself. John Baptist had been able to appreciate the value of Nicolas Roland's foundation from the unique standpoint of one who had been closely involved in the complex task of obtaining official approval for it. He knew very well the men of influence and authority in the city of Rheims, having had to approach them personally. Blain's quotations are replete with evidence of such intimate knowledge.

A second consideration arises from an examination of the quoted passages. All three biographers reflect repeatedly on the virtues of their hero, especially his charity, his humility and his piety. But the quotations reveal something more about the spiritual physiognomy of the Founder – something which is exemplified time and again in the actions of his life. In the first place it is evident from the quoted passages that John Baptist had already, at that early stage, a clear intuition of what was needed, an assured conviction of what had to be done. He knew and appreciated the wisdom of consulting others, but such consultation (suggests Campos) did not arise (as the biographers tend to convey) from a mere distrust of his own views. In the case we are considering he is seen assembling a group of clerical friends (a sort of "committee") to advise on Nyel's project, but we

notice that these are content to ratify the cogently expressed ideas of De La Salle himself. The humility of the saint, so much insisted upon by the biographers, has nothing of naivety about it: it is the humility of one who has a discerning mind, who assesses from personal knowledge the complexity of a situation and then commits himself to fostering the success of a project. The charity shown here goes much further than help given from a safe distance. It is the charity of a man determined that the one he is helping shall not be disappointed in his undertaking. It is a charity, moreover, which does not deter him from taking a critical stance vis-à-vis the parish priests from whom a choice must be made to ensure the success of the work.

In fact, concludes Campos, when the biographers evoke a certain diffidence on the part of M. de La Salle, a certain fear of making a blunder, they betray an inadequate perception of the real nature of their hero's humility and charity. John Baptist concerned himself with the success of Nyel's project because he believed it was just such a project as his friend and spiritual director, Canon Roland, would have cherished. In offering Adrien Nyel the hospitality of his own home he was doing something more than making a magnanimous gesture: he was taking what he saw to be a necessary measure for the prosperity of the venture. So far from resulting in a depreciation of the quality of John Baptist's virtues, their quality emerges in sharper relief once it is realised that he was deeply concerned that Nyel's undertaking should not fail.

Miguel Campos makes a further point with particular reference to the quoted words of M. de La Salle to M. Dorigny, requesting the latter to assume full responsibility for the opening of a first school in his parish. This is not to be read as evidence either of John Baptist's humility or of a reluctance to become personally involved. Rather it indicates that he did not want his own sponsorship of Nyel to jeopardise the chances of success. It was inevitable, and Canon de La Salle was aware of it, that he had aroused certain antagonisms in Rheims, by his own procedures on behalf of Roland's community of Sisters. Moreover he well knew (and explicitly stated) that M. Dorigny had the right to teach or arrange teaching for his parishioners, and *his* role in the business could not be challenged.

The three biographers all give us only the year, 1679, of the chance meeting between Canon de La Salle and Adrien Nyel and of the

subsequent opening of a school in the parish of Saint-Maurice; Léon Aroz suggests 15 March for the first event and 15 April for the second. M. Dorigny readily agreed to John Baptist's proposal, saying that he had recently been pre-occupied about the need of a school in his parish; he spontaneously offered to house Nyel and his companion in his presbytery and was grateful for the annual sum of 300 livres promised by Madame de Maillefer for their upkeep and salary. Nyel's flair and experience ensured a successful beginning for the venture and it was not long before word reached him that a wealthy widow, Madame l'Evêque de Croyères, a parishioner of Saint-Jacques, wished to endow a school for the poor boys of her parish. Nyel approached the lady, explained the purpose of his presence in Rheims, and offered his services for the charitable undertaking which he understood she had at heart. But, says Bernard, "*fearing that his offer might be refused, he added that he had the honour of being known by M. de La Salle, Canon of the Cathedral of Notre Dame, who would be able to assist him in carrying out Madame's intentions*".

And, adds Bernard, the mention of that name settled the matter, for Madame l'Evêque was not unaware of the young Canon's growing reputation for virtue and competence. She requested Nyel to ask M. de La Salle to call on her to discuss the matter . . . A natural sequence of events for the objective historian; a beckoning of God's finger for John Baptist de La Salle. He had thought that his response to Nyel's arrival in Rheims – his immediate offer of hospitality and his approach to M. Dorigny – had sufficiently satisfied his conviction that God's will was, to that extent, involved. Now the euphoric report from Adrien that Madame l'Evêque wished to discuss with him the possibility of a second school confronted him with a comparable situation in which the motives for assent were no less compelling than they had been in the previous case. Little by little, comments Miguel Campos, John Baptist was, without yet realising it, becoming directly involved in the provision of free education.

Having taken the measures needed for the Saint-Jacques foundation, he felt justified once more in assuming a passive role. The whole enterprise of the schools was Nyel's, and two foundations within six months was not only a commendable achievement, but was as much as even the dynamic Adrien could hope to cope with for the present. Canon de La Salle would certainly maintain his interest

in the progress of these two schools and in the welfare of Nyel and his masters, but the direct administration of the schools, and the organisation of the masters' way of life were, on any reckoning, the responsibility of the man from Rouen.

But, says Bernard, "*il se trompait bien heureusement*": John Baptist was – fortunately – mistaken if he thought that God required no more of him in the matter of the schools. Miguel Campos cautions us against a too-ready acceptance of the three biographers' stress, at this point, on Adrien Nyel's volatile temperament, his inability to "stay put". But he believes it must be admitted that Nyel's administrative gifts were unequal to fostering, with success, two new foundations in an ambience in which, both physically and psychologically, he was still relatively a stranger. The demands of the second foundation drew him away from the first and the staff of two whom he left to take care of the Saint-Maurice school while he got things started at Saint-Jacques, were still inexperienced. It says much for Nyel's personal ability that it was when he became involved in the second foundation that the first began to falter and the second to develop so rapidly that he had very soon to recruit two assistants to work with himself. M. Dorigny agreed to lodge all five teachers at Saint-Maurice but stipulated a maintenance fee of 200 livres for each of them. Madame de Maillefer's endowment accounted for 300 livres a year, Madame l'Evêque's was 500; John Baptist agreed to make up the deficit of 200. A passive role was not an easy one to maintain in the developing state of affairs!

A growing cause for concern was the continuing deterioration at the Saint-Maurice school, and before the end of 1679 Canon de La Salle had responded to this by renting a house near his own to serve as a residence for the group of schoolmasters. Bernard is the only biographer to give the location of this rented house, saying rather vaguely that it was "*behind Saint-Symphorien near the rampart*", and this has subsequently been identified as almost certainly the former home of one Mathieu Ruynart in the rue de la Grue. A glance at a contemporary map of Rheims shows that this was, in fact, no more than a hundred yards from the De La Salle residence in the rue Sainte-Marguerite (neither of the two houses survived the bombardments of Rheims during the 1914-1918 war).

By Christmas 1679 John Baptist had installed Nyel and his four assistants in the Maison Ruynart and had thereby assumed responsibility for their upkeep to which, however, the endowments

of Madame de Maillefer and Madam l'Evêque continued to make a substantial contribution. The parish priests of Saint-Maurice and Saint-Jacques remained responsible for the maintenance of the school premises in their respective parishes. But when, early in 1680, Adrien Nyel ("*a very persuasive man*" comments Bernard at this point) suggested that the new residence could well house a school for the poor boys of the parish of Saint-Symphorien, M. de La Salle gave his consent, thereby undertaking to maintain the two additional masters needed for this and speedily recruited by Nyel. "'Fondateur' à ce titre", comments Georges Rigault here (adding, however "mais non pas encore maître et chef"), and if we seek to isolate a moment in time which explains the Institute's tradition of celebrating the centenaries of its foundation in the eightieth year of the successive centuries, this act of establishing a school in the house to which he had brought Nyel's men would seem to be a worthy claimant.

The new opening was, according to Maillefer "*in a short time catering for more pupils than the other two*". "By this time," comments Battersby, "everybody in Rheims knew that Canon de La Salle was the one sponsoring the charity schools, and he was left with the onus of seeing that they were a success." Nevertheless, as Rigault underlined, De La Salle was not "in charge". He was certainly not a "superior" nor did Adrien Nyel's recruits constitute a "community". They were a group of men without qualification or training, though with just possibly sufficient sense of the usefulness of their work to render service in return for their keep and a modest salary; but not a community. John Baptist was quite ungrudging in contributing his now considerable share to the subsistence of the group, and he certainly had their spiritual welfare at heart in bringing them together near his own home: he hoped thereby, says Maillefer, to see them more often and he even proposed, and obtained their agreement for, a few rules to establish good order in the house. But he still believed that the responsibility for their work as schoolmasters rested with Nyel. Most of his own time was still absorbed by his attendance in choir, his domestic responsibilities and his personal studies: significantly, 1680 was the year in which (according to Aroz, who discusses the discrepancy regarding this date between Maillefer's 1680 and Blain's 1681) he received his Doctorate in Theology at the University of Rheims.

But, as Miguel Campos observes, the year 1680 heralded a great change in John Baptist's life. Thus far neither the ideas of Canon

Roland, nor John Baptist's personal convictions as to the utility of the schools, nor his early experience as a catechist during his student days at Saint-Sulpice, had put him in contact with the real situation of poor people. The narrowing of the distance between himself and the schoolmasters by his renting a house for them brought the well-to-do Canon to the threshold of a world to which he was more or less a stranger. The upper-class milieu in which he had grown up gave him an instinctive antipathy for the uncultured group that Nyel had recruited. On the other hand, he was quick to recognise that this small band represented a reality which he had known only in a notional way from his studies and especially from his involvement in Roland's work. Now his direct contact with Nyel's schoolmasters introduced him to a first-hand experience of the social miseries of his native city: it enabled him to begin to realise, as never before, the urgent need of the poor of Rheims for well-run schools and competent teachers. Unfamiliar mental attitudes and their unfamiliar formulation in words began to shape a change in his own way of viewing things, and the alchemy of Christian faith ensured that the transmutation took place at a spiritual level and came to be felt by John Baptist as a personal vocation, a call to associate himself with a particular group of men for a particular mission.

Blain (observes Campos) is the biographer who analyses most perceptively the interior process whereby this crystallisation of an option took place – or rather the way in which the exterior sequence of events began to converge with the inner responses of John Baptist's spirit to bring about this option. Nyel fell short in the matter of directing his company of tyro-schoolmasters. A gifted pedagogue himself, he yet lacked the patience to share his skills with others. He had himself learned his art by doing, and he assumed that his recruits would do the same: the important thing was that there should be a building full of boys; experience and common-sense would do the rest. And how the masters spent their time outside of school seemed to be only marginally relevant.

Inevitably the schools suffered, and the need to check the decline pressed upon Canon de La Salle with growing urgency. His name was associated with the enterprise. Merely human considerations imposed a need for action: the financial involvement of the two benefactresses; the co-operation that had been readily given by the parish priests of Saint-Maurice and Saint-Jacques; the growing murmurs of disappointed parents – all of whom looked to him, not

to Adrien Nyèl, for the remedy. It was a situation in the Founder's life which well illustrates Miguel Campos's theme that the interplay of human factors, not mystical insights, served to reveal God's will to John Baptist de La Salle and to move him along the path of his predestined journey.

Blain tells us that John Baptist now realised that one of two procedures must be adopted if the schools were to be saved: he must either go to live with the schoolmasters or bring them to live with him. And both alternatives were repugnant to him (as we shall learn from his own testimony). For advice as to which alternative to choose he decided to consult Père Barré – and this choice, observes Campos, was significant in itself. There were men in Rheims who could have been counted upon to offer John Baptist wise and disinterested advice. He preferred to take the opportunity of a visit to Paris (whither Barré had been transferred from Rouen five years before) to place the problem before the Minim – not simply because (according to Bernard) he considered Barré a saint but especially because he knew of the latter's first-hand experience of the task of founding schools for the poor, and specifically of his unsuccessful efforts to found schools for poor boys. The recourse to Barré at this juncture, notes Campos, suggests that John Baptist was beginning inwardly to accept that the need for Christian schools was one which he, personally, was being called upon to supply.

Père Barré's advice was that he should lodge the schoolmasters in his own home – advice which, adds Blain with an unexpected touch of irony, was easier to give than it was to obey! And Campos observes that, in fact, the recipient of the advice showed no precipitation in putting it into practice. John Baptist foresaw only too clearly the difficulties it would entail. If the saintly Minim had expressed God's will for him, the implementation of that will must take place with due consideration for the reactions and feelings of all who would be affected by it: first and foremost his own family, and then his other relatives and friends who constituted the social milieu in which he had grown up and which had served so potently to shape him into the person he was. And not least the psychological effect of the transfer on the schoolmasters themselves had to be considered. But the need to save the newly-founded schools was urgent and Barré's advice pointed the way.

John Baptist proceeded by stages. He began, on 24 June 1680, by bringing the masters across to the rue Sainte-Marguerite for their

meals – a situation which, as Lawrence O’Toole appositely comments in his brief tercentenary biography of the Founder, leaves us wondering who were the more embarrassed, the members of the family or the gauche teachers, untrained in the etiquette of polite society. According to Blain, John Baptist had already introduced reading at table when he first took his deceased parents’ place as head of the household; if this was so, the continuation of the custom now served perhaps to diminish the tension created by the bizarre table-fellowship.

The arrangement continued for some months, but the effect was to contain, rather than remedy, the deterioration in the group’s discipline and morale. When, during the Holy Week of 1681, Nyel set off (against his host’s advice) to explore the possibility of an opening at Guise, John Baptist took the opportunity to conduct a retreat for the schoolmasters in his home, keeping them there from first thing in the morning until after evening prayers. And the beneficial effect of this led him to the momentous decision to install them fully, as from 24 June 1681, at the rue Sainte-Marguerite.

## 4

# *The Founder's Reflections on the Beginnings*

Writing about the unsatisfactory situation in the schools, manifesting itself already soon after the start of the second foundation at Saint-Jacques, Canon Blain continues, in characteristic vein:

*"The light of the Holy Spirit was already revealing all these failings to M. de La Salle and inspiring him with the desire to remedy them. God was giving him grace for the work he destined him for; and this grace increased daily in him and almost in spite of him; for he did not at all aspire to take charge of the schools, and still less of the masters . . ."*

The biographer then adds, almost casually, the following words, which Miguel Campos quotes at the beginning of a deeply interesting discussion of the way in which John Baptist reflected on the developments – the *événement-clef* – outlined in our previous chapter:

*"M. de La Salle says in a Memoir written in his own hand to inform the Brothers by what ways divine Providence had brought their Institute into being: 'I had imagined that the care which I assumed of the schools and the masters would amount only to a marginal involvement committing me to no more than providing for the subsistence of the masters and ensuring that they acquitted themselves of their tasks with piety and devotedness . . .'"*

Just a page and a half later, after further edifying evaluations of his hero's state of mind at this time, Blain quotes again as follows:

*"'It was,' he says again in the forementioned Memoir, 'as a result of two occurrences, namely my meeting with Monsieur Nyel and the proposition put forward by this lady (Madame l'Evêque), that I began to concern myself with schools for boys. Previously I had given no thought at all to the matter, though this was not for lack of people putting the idea to me. Several of Monsieur Roland's friends had tried to interest me in the matter. But the possibility had not gained entry into my mind, and I had never entertained the notion of doing anything of the kind. If in fact I had ever thought that the obligation of charity which prompted my concern for the welfare of the schoolmasters would lead me to feel it a duty to live with them I should have abandoned the work. For, from a natural*

*point of view, I considered as inferior to my manservant the men I was obliged, especially in the first stages of the undertaking, to employ in the schools, and the very thought that I should have to live with them would have been unbearable. It was, in fact, a source of great trouble to me that, at an early stage, I brought them to live in my house, a situation which lasted for two years. Evidently this was the reason why God, who directs all things with wisdom and with gentleness and is not at all accustomed to force the inclination of men, wishing to draw me entirely into undertaking the care of the schools, did so in a quite imperceptible way, and with plenty of time, so that one commitment led me into another without my having foreseen it in the beginning.”*

The first thing to note about these two quotations is Blain’s explicit attribution of them to “*a memoir written in (M. de La Salle’s) own hand . . .*”. And the second point to notice is that Blain’s inverted commas here *purport* to be authentic: he does not hedge his quotations with an “*à peu près*”, as we saw him doing with his quotations in the previous chapter. Have we then here the very words of M. de La Salle as written in the *Memoir of the Beginnings*?

Miguel Campos presents us with an exercise in comparative textual study which sheds light on this question. Frère Bernard, who was the first to use the *Memoir*, and whose references to it both in his biography of the Founder and in certain “*Remarques*” he wrote about the biography, leave no room for doubt that he had the manuscript before him as he wrote, tantalisingly gives very few direct quotations from it. But the first of these belongs to the same extract as the one provided by Blain, so that we have a first point of reference already. Bernard’s passage reads:

*“Let us listen to (M. de La Salle) himself speaking: ‘God,’ he says, ‘who conducts all things wisely and sweetly, and who is not at all accustomed to force the inclinations of men, wishing to draw me altogether into undertaking the care of the schools, has done so in a quite imperceptible way and in a short time, such that one commitment has led me into another without my having foreseen it in the beginning.”*

The quotation is not identical with the corresponding one in Blain but it is encouragingly close. The few differences emerge from the above literal translation as follows: Blain’s “*with wisdom and with gentleness*” (“*avec sagesse et avec douceur*”) appears in Bernard as “*wisely and sweetly*” (“*sagement et suavement*”); Blain’s “*entirely*” (“*entièrement*”) is in Bernard “*altogether*” “*tout à fait*”; where Blain has “*with plenty of time*” (“*en beaucoup de temps*”) Bernard has “*in a short time*” (“*en*

*peu de temps*"); Blain's "so that" ("de sorte que") appears in Bernard as "such that" ("de telle sorte que"); and Blain uses the past historic tense where Bernard has the perfect. Otherwise the two quotations coincide, and only one of the differences is of any significance, namely the reference to the length of time involved.

Maillefer does not seem to have had access to the Founder's manuscript itself, since he ascribes his one citation to a letter of M. de La Salle. Nevertheless, his quotation (which again, usefully for our purpose, is identifiable with those common to Blain and Bernard, already quoted) has obviously its source in the *Memoir*. In his 1723 version of his biography of his uncle, Maillefer wrote:

*"Here is how (M. de La Salle) explains the situation to one of his friends in a letter which he wrote to him on the subject: 'God who conducts all things with wisdom and gentleness and who is not at all accustomed to force the inclinations of men, wishing to draw me into undertaking entirely the care of the schools, has done so in a quite imperceptible way and in a short time so that one commitment led me into another without my having foreseen it in the beginning.'"*

This is identical with Blain and Bernard where they are identical with each other, except in one detail: where they have "the inclination of men" Maillefer has "the inclinations of men". For their discrepancies, Maillefer coincides with Blain in "entirely" and "so that" and "led me" and almost, but not quite, in "with wisdom and gentleness" (Maillefer omits Blain's second "with"); he coincides with Bernard only in "has done so" and in "in a short time". In his 1740 re-draft of his biography (written seven years after the publication of Blain's work) the Maurist retains his 1723 text of the passage quoted except in three details in which he brings it into line with Blain: "with gentleness", "the inclination" and "did so".

It is possible to extend the area of comparison beyond this very brief passage – at least between Blain and Bernard (since Maillefer affords no further evidence of use of the *Memoir*). The long passage we have quoted from Blain has its counterpart in Bernard who, however, instead of claiming to cite the Founder's words, incorporates them into his narrative as follows (the underlining draws attention to the resemblances with Blain):

*"It was thus that God made use of these two persons, namely Monsieur Nyel and Madame L'Evêque, to bring Monsieur de La Salle to take charge of these schools, a thing to which he had given no thought at all, as we have previously remarked and as he himself testifies in his manuscript."*

It is true, however, that several persons whom he knew and who had been associated with the late Monsieur Roland, had sometimes proposed that he should undertake the founding of schools for boys as Monsieur Roland had done for girls. But this proposition had never gained entry into his mind and he had never had the slightest thought of doing anything to the contrary, in view of his obligations as canon, his care of the community of Sisters and his responsibility for his family. And if he had thought at that time that such a commitment would have obliged him consequently to live with these schoolmasters, he would never have undertaken the care either of the masters or of the schools. For, from a natural point of view, he had only a poor opinion of these masters, who were quite without culture, and it would consequently have been unbearable for him to think that he might have to live with them. He did not suffer much when he first introduced them into his home but this not happen until two years later."

And two or three pages further on there is the following reflection in the same vein:

"He had imagined, as he himself says, that the direction he would assume of the schools and of the masters would have been only a minimal involvement which would in no way interfere in their regard, other than to ensure, by going to see them sometimes, that they applied themselves to their employment with devotion and to take care that they had what was necessary to live."

We are left with the impression that Bernard is simply transposing the first person singular of the manuscript to the third person narrative which he preferred for his purpose.

This brief comparative study of the texts is more than a mere academic exercise. It serves to assure us, on any reasonable grounds, that in the important extracts from Blain quoted at the beginning of this chapter, we are reading, if not the absolutely verbatim reproduction of what M. de La Salle wrote in his *Memoir*, certainly as near a transcript as makes no difference. In other words, we have here one of the occasions when we can see the Founder as the man he really was, undistorted by any personal "reading" on the part of the biographer. By offering such quotations, Blain is (inadvertently, no doubt) providing his readers with a means of checking the validity of his own interpretations, specifically his edifying commentaries and his tendency to draw lessons from the virtues exemplified by his hero. It is hardly in keeping with the general tone of the biography to be told of John Baptist's repugnance at the very thought of having

to live with the first schoolmasters or that he considered Nyel's men inferior to his own manservant – a remark which can hardly escape sounding snobbish.

Yet the most striking feature of the religious experience of John Baptist de La Salle revealed in this *parole-force* which is known as the *Memoir of the Beginnings* is, says Miguel Campos, his unswerving orientation in the direction of God's will. In all that happened he looked for the will of God, and having discovered it he followed it, without hesitation and without compromise. But he did not indulge in subjective interpretations of what the will of God might be, or in dreams of unrealisable projects. His search for that will was characterised by a critical, unhurried attention to the facts of existence in a world of human beings. Adherence to God's will inevitably entails commitment to a cause recognisable in human terms. So John Baptist took Adrien Nyel seriously. Because he believed that the provision of free Christian education for boys must be in accordance with God's will, the success of Nyel's project became a matter of first importance to him. But the measures he adopted to foster that success were based on quickly-perceived judgments of the possibilities and limitations of the existential situation prevailing in Rheims at that time.

Nor must we lose sight of the fact (clearly revealed by the *Memoir*) that these same measures, so shrewdly considered and then so assiduously pursued, had simply the success of Nyel's project in view – no more than that. John Baptist did not (he assures us himself) recognise in these events God's summons to himself; he did not perceive that Providence was using Nyel as the catalyst of his own vocation. He had entered into the Rouen visitor's undertaking on the assumption that his role would entail only a "*marginal involvement*" – it would be the role of a counsellor, a protector even, operating from the exterior of the project's development, the responsibility for which would be Nyel's own. He had thought that once the enterprise was launched (and he would do all he could to bring this about since he was convinced that God wanted it) he could withdraw and resume the even tenor of his life as a Canon of the Rheims Chapter and as head of the family home. Had any intuition occurred to him that he might eventually become internally involved in the enterprise to the extent even of having to live side by side with Nyel's first recruits, such an intuition would (on his own admission) have been simply "*unbearable*".

But still more significant is the evidence contained in the quoted passages that John Baptist came, in time, to realise that all that had happened before his meeting with Adrien Nyel was leading him, in the divine plan, towards his life's work. God, who "*directs all things with wisdom and with gentleness*", had been "educating" John Baptist, gradually and imperceptibly, into his vocation, without advertence on John Baptist's part, without pressure on God's. For the young Canon, with a distinguished ecclesiastical career comfortably ahead of him, the concrete facts of the unfolding situation were, so to speak, bearers of revelational truth: the revelation that he was being guided into a far-reaching participation in God's salvific purpose for mankind; the revelation also that without divine help he would have been incapable of overcoming his natural repugnance regarding the idea of living with the uncultured men assembled by Adrien Nyel. That he gained that help and overcame his repugnance was due to his steadfast willingness to be directed by God's guiding hand, leading him progressively on to an increasingly firm acceptance of whatever might be entailed, and ultimately to an irreversible entry into the world of schoolmasters and schools, and through them into the world of the poor.

Two phrases of the *Memoir* are of special interest in this connection: "*God, who directs ('conduit') all things*" and "*one commitment led ('conduisit') me into another*". They testify to John Baptist's retrospective conviction that his life had been unfolding under the continuous influence of Providence. Sensitivity to the benevolent and sure direction of Providence was the constant factor of his spiritual experience, but it was a sensitivity activated by the events succeeding one another in his day to day existence. His use of the same verb "conduire" for the action of God in his life and for the cause-and-effect sequence of his own accepted commitments underlines this. Not that he was in some way "manipulated" by Providence, compulsively or passively finding "signs" of the divine will in every turn of events. (Campos notes that the word "Providence" itself does not appear in any of the quoted extracts from the *Memoir*.) On the contrary, as he emphasises himself in the *Memoir* (using the strong negative "*point*" rather than "*pas*") "*God does not force the inclination*". Each commitment is made with deliberation, the human factors being taken into account and the pros and cons fully weighed. But, once made, the choice is without reservation. When John Baptist wrote that he had in the first place

imagined that the care which he had assumed of the first two schools and their masters would mean no more than a “*marginal involvement*”, we are not to take this to mean that he was half-hearted in assuming that care: the spontaneity and persuasiveness of his offer of hospitality to Nyel, as well as the busy consultations he immediately embarked upon sufficiently demonstrate the contrary. But at that time he believed that God’s will required no more of him. It was the sequence of one commitment after another, each recognised as willed by God and therefore unreservedly accepted – a sequence amounting to what, in Miguel Campos’s terminology, was the first *événement-clef* in the founder’s life-story – which brought him to the full consciousness of his place in God’s redemptive plan. And the *Memoir of the Beginnings* is the *parole-force* in which we see him revealing this consciousness.

## 5

### *First Steps in Community Living*

The biographers go into some detail about the tensions resulting in the family circle when John Baptist brought the schoolmasters to live at the rue Sainte-Marguerite, and also about the adverse reactions of the social circles to which the family belonged. It is necessary to keep in mind this backdrop of disapproval and criticism if we are to appreciate the depth of his commitment to God's will which, in the developing sense of isolation from former acquaintances towards a sense of fraternity with the humble masters, he believed he was fulfilling. Nyel's recruits did not all take to the new, disciplined life-style which the Canon aimed at, and some of them withdrew. But any doubt that this might have raised in his mind was turned into reassurance when other younger men sought to join the company. Bernard and Blain describe this heartening turn of events in words so similar that perhaps they drew their information from the *Memoir of the Beginnings*. According to both biographers the newcomers showed a natural talent for teaching as well as a religious spirit and a disposition for community life.

This situation lasted for exactly one year but at the end of that period M. de La Salle took the momentous decision of renting a house some two kilometres away in the rue Neuve and taking up residence there with his fledgling community. Strangely enough, neither Bernard nor Blain gives a date for this crucial development, but Maillefer is explicit: "(M. de La Salle) *began to think about leaving the family home and withdrawing with his disciples to a district less exposed to worldly distractions. He rented a house in the rue Neuve, opposite the Convent of the Sisters of Sainte-Claire, and . . . took up residence there on the feast of Saint John the Baptist 1682.*" (In his earlier draft, as if to leave no doubt about the matter, Maillefer had added to this: ". . . one year after he had taken them into his own home.")

Miguel Campos provides an interesting note on the significance of this date 24 June, and his information serves at once to ratify the accuracy of all three biographers in indicating it for the transfer of Nyel's men to the family home in 1681 and Maillefer's in giving it for the move to the rue Neuve the following year; and also to modify the impression they all convey that John Baptist chose this day by

way of placing two momentous actions in his life under the protection of his patron saint. June 24 was, as it happened, the legal date at Rheims for surrendering or renewing an option on rented property. In 1681 Canon de La Salle had to decide whether to continue renting the Maison Ruynart from June 24 for at least another year, or to withdraw the schoolmasters from it permanently. The following year the rue Neuve house became available for renting and occupying on the same date.

There is disagreement among the three biographers as to the precise moment when the term “Brother” was adopted and when a specific rule of life began to be followed as a conscious act of adherence to community living. Bernard identifies it with the arrival of the new candidates while the group were still housed in the De La Salle residence; and he adds that a religious habit was also adopted at this time. He further mentions that the prayers in common were referred to from the beginnings as “the exercises” and that the ones used at this earliest stage were still in use in all the houses of the Institute at the time Bernard was writing – forty years later. Maillefer is in general agreement with Bernard though he places these various developments shortly after the transfer to the rue Neuve. He mentions that not only the term “Brother” began to be used but that the title “Brothers of the Christian Schools” was adopted, another gesture of self-identification as a community. Blain, on the other hand, attributes the introduction of such structures to the formal assemblies which in due course came to be held, a chronology which Miguel Campos considers more probable and which, on the particular question, at least, of the adoption of the habit, has the support of a statement in the Founder’s own hand: writing in 1690, John Baptist declared (in his *Memoir on the Habit*) that the habit had been in use in the Society for five years, which indicates 1685 as the date of its adoption – three years later than the time proposed by Bernard and Maillefer.

But whatever the historical reality of these details, the concept of “community”, as Campos emphasises, dates from those early days in the family home in the rue Sainte-Marguerite. The implementation of the idea of community was not something imposed by John Baptist, but the product of an interaction – of the action of the leader proposing the needs of a new lifestyle, coalescing with that of the new applicants who sought to join because they felt attracted to the way of life envisaged by the thirty-year-old Canon. The

community, in concept and in visible reality, grew from a merging of John Baptist's spiritual journey, faithfully following the successive signposts of his life's events pointing him always to the fulfilment of God's will, and the spiritual journey of young men who, at the outset of their careers, began to sense already that God had a plan for them also.

Campos believes that a correct perspective of the transfer to the rue Neuve requires that it be seen as the culminating point of a preceding sequence of events, the terminus, so to speak, of one early stage in the Founder's journey. The developing sense of community is intimately linked with the radical decision to quit the De La Salle household. Maillefer and Blain blur this connection by suggesting that the first essays in community living occurred only after the transfer to the rue Neuve had been made. The difficulty about this suggestion of the biographers is that it is called into question by information supplied by themselves. Blain is specific that *"it was at the end of the year 1681 and the beginning of the following year 1682 that the schoolmasters' dwelling ('la maison des Maitres d'Ecole') began to assume the true form of a community."* Already the strange use here of the phrase *"la maison des Maitres d'Ecole"* introduces an element of vagueness into Blain's information, since he himself has just informed his readers that M. de La Salle took the masters into his own home on 24 June 1681, six months, at the most, prior to the development indicated in the passage just quoted.

Both he, therefore, and Maillefer are correct in placing the first beginnings of true community life about the middle of the year of residence at the rue Sainte-Marguerite, but distort the reality by suggesting that these beginnings took place only after the move to the rue Neuve. Campos excuses this misrepresentation by suggesting that the biographers were no doubt trying to present a linear and logical account of what happened, but that the extremely rich religious experience they were trying to describe in fact transcended logical analysis and presentation. But it is a distortion which needs to be corrected because it obscures the fact that it was while he was still in the family home that John Baptist came to realise that there was a fundamental opposition between the values of the world he had grown up in and those of the world to which he was being ineluctably drawn by his determination, at whatever cost, to follow the line of God's will. It was here also that he realised that the motivation of Nyel's original group – a modest living for well-

intentioned services – was inadequate for the work which, in God’s plan, needed to be done. But when these departed, God showed him that there were others who were able to discern that God might need *them* to fulfil a purpose for the salvation of the poor and who would be content to learn from Canon de La Salle, and from one another in fraternal communion, how best to respond to that need. He had brought Nyel’s men into his home because he felt constrained to provide the opportunity and guidance for disciplined living which he deemed essential for the success of the schools. When he left it a year later with the group of young men who had largely replaced the first-comers, it was as the superior of a religious community in the making.

And when, on that June day in 1682, he closed the door of the family home and walked, with his “community”, across the town to the newly-rented house in the rue Neuve, he was expressing a radical option, what Miguel Campos calls a personal “exodus”. But (says our guide) it would be misleading to interpret his action, as the biographers seem to do, as a sort of flight from the world. On the contrary, he was making himself available, as never before, to the world which God so loved that he gave it his only-begotten Son. John Baptist *was* renouncing a world which offered him comfort, success and social prestige in exchange for a world which had nothing to offer him but which sought much from him. But he was not even intending a gesture of adverse judgment on the former by his act of renunciation. He was merely responding to a conviction, to which the sequence of events had led him, that the irreducible incompatibility between two sets of values required the choice of one or the other.

Blain devotes a number of pages simply to describing and illustrating the fervour that reigned in these early days at the rue Neuve. The personality of the leader made a profound impression on the young men who had spontaneously presented themselves for admission to the community and all, says Blain, “*felt a holy desire to follow in his footsteps along the arduous path of perfection*”. Needless to say the biographer gives full scope in this part of his story to his tendency to inflate his theme, and here, as elsewhere, his almost ingenious ability to say the same thing over again in different eloquent terms does not make for easy reading. But a certain thread of factual information runs through the embroidery and an impression of

intense fervour in this first community convincingly remains. The finely-balanced rapport between the young men and the Canon is strikingly conveyed by the fact that they insisted that he, and no other, should be their confessor, despite his protracted reluctance to agree. The names of a few of these early disciples, mentioned by Blain, belong, it is not too fanciful to say, to the “Fioretti” of the Institute. Nicolas Bourlette was the son of well-to-do parents who tried repeatedly but in vain to make him return home from the austere life at the rue Neuve. He was teaching at the Laon school with another Brother who fell ill and had to be absent from his work. Nicolas undertook not only to take care of his class along with his own, but also to be infirmarian to his sick companion. The parish priest of the school concerned, worried about the effect of this excessive work on the health of Brother Nicolas, urged him to tell the children to stay away from school for a couple of weeks. Nicolas respectfully replied that he couldn’t think of doing such a thing without authorisation from M. de La Salle, but to put the kindly pastor at ease he added, “Father, I have my right foot in my class, my left one in the other class, my mind with my sick Brother, and my heart in heaven”. Blain had the story from the priest himself, still living at the time Blain was writing.

Brother Maurice (his family name is not given) is described by Blain as seeming to be “*a reincarnation of Jesus Christ*”, providing his companions with the “*very image of our Lord as he was when he lived on earth*”. And when Maurice died young, it could be said of him “*what the people said of Jesus Christ himself: ‘He hath done all things well’*”.

Maillefer, more restrained and concise in his portrayal of the young community, nevertheless finds an image of it in the early pages of the *Acts of the Apostles*. “*The Brothers,*” he writes, “*had now only one heart and one mind. They dwelt together in great peace, assisting one another with tender and compassionate kindness. Everything was regarded as the possession of all, and no selfish interest was allowed to intrude. The union manifested by their regular life recalled the life of the first Christians*”.

Meanwhile the work of the ailing schools had made a striking recovery (“*Jesus Christ,*” says Blain in a characteristic comment, “*could have said of it: Behold, I make all things new through my servant.*”) and requests for further openings began to reach John Baptist. A primary source in support of this fact is available in the form of the earliest known letter in the Founder’s handwriting. It

was an acceptance of a request from the Mayor and Aldermen of Chateau-Porcien, and the gracious wording of the letter suggests that the request had given joy and encouragement to the recipient. The letter carries the date 20 June 1682 – just four days before the group’s migration to the rue Neuve – and the Château-Porcien authorities are assured that two “schoolmasters” (the term “Brother” presumably not yet adopted) would be sent on the following Saturday which, in that year, was the 24th itself. An opening had been made at Rethel the previous March, and in the same year schools were opened at Guise and Laon (though these were established by Nyel, acting almost independently of John Baptist who wanted more time to consolidate the training of the young people at the rue Neuve).

## 6

### *Point of No Return*

As in the early Church, then, the interior life of the community was developing alongside apostolic response, and Maillefer's *koinonia* projection for the first Lasallians seems appropriately chosen. But the parallel goes further than this for – as in the early Church – a temporary disturbance to the prevailing unity of mind and heart occurred, which was to have far-reaching effects in furthering God's purpose. Maillefer's own account of the *contretemps* will serve to put us in the picture. Immediately after telling us that the spirit of the new community "*recalled the life of the first Christians*", he adds:

*"But there was one failing which the devil was able to exploit, namely their excessive concern for the future. Their living standard was exceedingly modest and they possessed no personal capital at all, and so, from time to time, they became somewhat depressed at the prospect of what would happen to them if M. de La Salle found that he could not remain with them. Chimerical ideas about this entered their minds and made them anxious and discouraged. M. de La Salle noticed this, and when he asked them about it they told him frankly that they could see no stability or permanence in their situation. It would take very little, they said, to upset everything, and it was a gloomy prospect for them to sacrifice the years of their youth in the service of others and not be sure that at the end of their days they would have a place to retire to and means to rest from their labours."*

According to both Maillefer and Blain, John Baptist countered this with a speech which both quote, Maillefer in summary, Blain, apparently, in full. It is Blain's version that Miguel Campos cites, commenting that although it is clear that Blain has personally influenced the wording (the style is prolix and preachy, and therefore quite uncharacteristic of the Founder) there is sufficient verbal resemblance between his version and Maillefer's to justify the belief that both have used an authentic source. Here is how Blain puts it:

*"Men of little faith, your lack of trust sets limits to a benevolence which is unlimited. Surely if that benevolence is infinite, universal and uninterrupted (and none of you doubts that it is so) it will always be concerned for you and will never fail you. You seek assurances. Are they*

*not to be found in the pages of the Gospels? The word of Jesus Christ is your guarantee, and you could have none more reliable since it was endorsed with his blood and sealed with the seal of his infallible truth. Why then are you beginning to waver? If the solemn promises of God himself cannot calm your anxieties and your worries about the future, what mere financial resources can take their place? Consider the lilies of the field — it is Jesus Christ himself who invites us to do so — and the grass of the field; and admire the opulence of beauty with which God has clothed them. Nothing is lacking to them, and Solomon himself, in all the splendour of his glory, was not so well adorned. Open your eyes and see the birds of the air and the little creatures that crawl upon the ground: all have what is necessary for life; God provides for their needs. They have no grain-stores, nor wine-cellars, but everywhere they discover nourishment which Providence prepares and puts before them. They do not sow and they do not reap, but they find the means of subsistence. Their heavenly Father ensures that they do. If his beneficent and generous hand extends its care even to the meanest insects which men tread underfoot, even to the grass which withers and then serves only for kindling a fire, can you believe, men of little faith, that he to whom you are consecrating your youth and devoting your services now, will abandon you in your old age, and allow a life spent in work for him to drag out its last years in penury? Have confidence then in a bounty which is infinite, and honour it by entrusting to it all your cares about yourselves. Leave aside all your worry about the present and all your anxiety about the future; occupy yourselves with what you have to do at each moment as it is given to you, and do not burden the day which is passing with doubts about the day to follow. What you are lacking for the morrow God will supply when the morrow comes, provided you know how to trust him. God would work miracles rather than fail your trust. For proof I give you, along with the assurances of Jesus Christ, the experience of the saints. The miracles of Providence are daily occurrences, and they cease only for those who lose faith.”*

John Baptist's appeal to the gospel texts in this speech failed to restore tranquillity to the wavering group. As Campos comments, they felt that he had not given due weight to their experience of insecurity because he had not known any such experience himself. The three biographers all quote, with some variations, the response the community made to their protector's earnest exhortations. Blain gives it as follows:

*“It is easy for you to speak since you lack nothing. You have a well-paid canonry and a substantial patrimony to guarantee you against want. If*

*our enterprise fails you will still be secure; the disreption of our lives will leave yours untouched. We are men without means, without income and without the qualifications needed to gain an income. Where should we go, what should we do, if this undertaking of the schools were to collapse or if people decided they no longer wanted us? Penury would be our only lot, and begging the only means to relieve it."*

The response serves to focus our attention on the gulf that separated the spiritual stance of the Founder from that of his disciples. For John Baptist the assurances of Jesus Christ regarding trust in God were words to be taken literally as they stood. His own trust in Providence had already, in the relatively brief span of thirty-one years, been tested more than once, and his reaction in each case had served only to strengthen his faith and his conviction that unquestioning trust was never misplaced. But the rejoinder of the community when he tried to inspire them with a similar sense of confidence made him realise that he was arguing from a different plane from theirs. Trust in Providence was, in his case, a spiritual emolument consequent upon his successive exercises of faith; for them it was an ideological concept not self-evidently reconcilable with their personal experience of poverty. And the fact that such trust was being urged upon them by one for whom the experience of poverty was itself no more than an ideological concept (though they did not for a moment doubt his sincerity or benevolence) did little to make such reconciliation possible. John Baptist was brought, by the frankness and depth of feeling inherent in their objection, to the point of questioning the reality of his own trust in Providence. Was he himself quite so convinced of the dependability of the gospel assurances as he was urging them to be? That moment of self-questioning, the point at which two paths (his own and that of the masters) intersected, was an *événement-clef* to which all that had gone before had led.

Canon de La Salle might reasonably, and laudably, have responded to these self-questionings by assuring his disciples that all he possessed was to be used for their welfare and security; that he would ensure, by the material resources at his disposal, that their fears for the future would never become a reality. The community themselves would have accepted such a response – their reason for voicing their anxieties was presumably to evoke such an assurance. John Baptist, it may be safely assumed, was fully aware of the arguments, natural and supernatural, that might have been put, in favour of so prudent and

so charitable a course of action., But he hesitated to act, not because he thought too much was being asked of him, but because he wondered whether it was enough. Eventually he decided to seek advice and, predictably, his choice of adviser was the saintly Minim, Père Barré, he who had earlier given him the unpalatable advice to take Nyel's men into his own home.

The substance of Père Barré's response on this occasion is quoted by all three biographers; and Miguel Campos considers the text to be "of capital importance" for our understanding of the Founder's development. Blain presents it in these terms:

"(In answer to the proposition that Canon de La Salle should use his wealth to put the enterprise of the schools on a secure footing) *Barré replied: 'Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head.'* These words are Jesus Christ's, and this is how Père Barré developed them: *'Who are these foxes of whom the sacred text speaks? They are the children of this world, who cling to earthly possessions. Who are these birds of the air? They are religious, who have the shelter of their cells. But schoolmasters and schoolmistresses, whose vocation it is to educate the poor in the following of Jesus Christ, should possess no more on earth than did the Son of man. Divine providence must be the only foundation on which to establish the work of the Christian schools. Every other means of support is inappropriate for them; but that single one is unshakable, and the schools themselves will remain unshakable so long as they have no other foundation.'*"

The significance of this intervention by Père Barré is that it introduced a radical shift in the nature of the inquiry. By a simple and literal exegesis of a gospel text, Barré placed the enterprise of the schools on the level of a vocation to follow Christ in utter poverty. For Barré it was not a question of how the economic viability and security of the undertaking were to be achieved: as he saw it, material considerations would only be a hindrance to the success of the work. Christ had once warned a man who had expressed a desire to follow him that the Son of man had nowhere to lay his head. In Barré's interpretation an acceptance of such material poverty was a condition of discipleship. The enterprise of the Christian schools was a call to John Baptist and to his schoolmasters to follow Christ on that condition. The only foundation of the enterprise must be their trust in Providence.

The above must suffice as a brief and too simplified presentation of

Miguel Campos's rich discussion of this intervention of Père Barré at a crucial moment in the Founder's life. The deeper self-examination to which the intervention led is next studied, and once again it is Blain who furnishes the source-text for our purpose. In this case, in fact, Blain is the only one of the three biographers to provide the text, and this makes it uncertain whether the passage is quoted, or even paraphrased, from the *Memoir of the Beginnings*. But Blain presents the passage in inverted commas, and the style of the extract is nearer (except significantly in one or two places, which will be noted) to that of the Founder's known writings than to that of Blain himself. Furthermore, as Campos points out, the overall effect of the quotation is to correct Blain's own understanding of the significance of Barré's intervention: for Blain, the Founder was confronted with an invitation to give his disciples an example of total renunciation, to teach them a lesson of trust in Providence; but for John Baptist, the self-examination contained in the passage now to be quoted shows that the Minim's reply was a revelation of the nature of God's call to him, a summons to a total trust in a Providence *that would not fail to sustain and foster the apostolic enterprise of the schools*. Whether or not, then, the passage comes from, or is based on, the *Memoir*, it is a reasonable assumption that Blain's source is authentically autobiographical.

The biographer presents the text in the form of ten numbered articles, the first six of which provide a sort of "state of the question":

(1) *I cannot open my mouth and talk to them of the spiritual advantages of poverty if I am not poor myself; nor of trust in Providence so long as I have material guarantees against destitution myself; nor of perfect confidence in God so long as a quite good income relieves me of any need for anxiety.*

(2) *So long as I remain as I am, and they remain as they are, their temptation will persist, since the source of it will continue and I shall be unable to offer a remedy: for my own security will continue to be a specious, and even reasonable, pretext for their doubts about the present and anxiety for their future.*

(3) *A temptation so plausible in appearance cannot fail, sooner or later, to have the effect intended by the devil: the masters, either as a group or one by one, will quit, and leave me with a vacant house and the schools without personnel.*

(4) *Such a withdrawal will cause a stir in the town and will frighten off any other persons who may have thought of joining us: even before*

*entering, their sense of vocation will fade, blighted by the same temptation that will have driven others out.*

*(5) Schools without personnel to draw upon will certainly fail, and those who will have contributed to their foundation, or their heirs, will demand compensation.*

*(6) Thus, step by step, the institution of the free Christian schools will disintegrate and be buried under its ruins with no hope of ever being re-established.*

In such terms John Baptist analyses the problem with which he is faced. The logical sequence of his thought is noticeable, but the principal interest of the argument is that it demonstrates that his overriding concern, at this moment in his life, is for the schools. It is the down-to-earth argument of a man weighing the likely consequences to the schools of his "remaining as he is" so long as his group of followers "remain as they are". It is not the soliloquy of a person sensing a call to heroic sanctity and pondering the acceptance of Christlike poverty as a response to that call; it is rather that of one who sees in practical terms the possible, even probable, cause-and-effect sequence between his remaining a canon with a comfortable income, and the ruin of an enterprise for the poor which is seen to be willed by God.

But renouncing a canonry was, as personal experience had already shown him, a far from simple step to take and, in the next two articles of the document which Blain purports to be quoting, we find the pros and cons of the proposition carefully weighed:

*(7) Even if there were no reason to fear these grave consequences, ought I, can I even, be the superior of these schoolmasters without ceasing to be a canon? Is it possible for me to reconcile the need to be always present in the community for the spiritual exercises and to be always available to the masters, with the duties of choir and office entailed by the canonry? If not, then a choice must be made.*

*(8) It is true that a canonry is not an obstacle to the performance of good works, nor does the necessary attendance in choir to sing the praises of God prevent one from rendering other services to the Church and devoting oneself to the salvation of souls. It is possible to divide one's time between these two noble functions and thus demonstrate that being a good canon does not imply idleness when away from choir, nor does it mean finding a plausible pretext for a life of repose when not required for the office, growing fat in slothful indolence, doing nothing in the Lord's vineyard. But the question for me is whether I can be both a conscientious canon and*

*a superior dutifully in residence with his community. If I were to fulfil worthily the latter role I should have to forego all the duties of the former, since the need to be constantly present in the community house would make it impossible ever to attend choir. Hence, if both duties are irreconcilable I must make a choice of one or the other. Five or six hours of office every day would mean too great an interruption to my presence with a community under my direction.*

Campos comments at this point that it is not impossible that Blain himself has contributed something to this last article in so far as it claims (in a noticeably more diffuse style than that of the preceding articles) that compatibility is possible between a canonry and an active apostolate: Blain himself was a canon and remained one when he was charged with the direction, as ecclesiastical superior, of the Brothers' community at Rouen. Be that as it may, the effect of article (8) is to weaken the logical thrust of the rest. The analysis developed in the previous articles had seemed to leave no choice as to what was the right thing to do. By the end of article (8) John Baptist is saying merely that *if* the duties of canon and superior are irreconcilable "*I must make a choice of one or the other*". The modulation makes us aware that there is question at this moment in John Baptist's itinerary of what Miguel Campos calls a "crise de vocation" – of a profound self-examination as to what God is calling him to; for whatever choice is made now must be irrevocable.

Hence it is that two final articles remain in the document Blain is quoting, and these in fact set out the ultimate criteria for such a choice:

(9) *What considerations can guide my decision in this matter? Which alternative must I adopt? The greater glory of God, the greater service of the Church, my personal sanctification, the salvation of souls — these are the objectives which I should keep before me and which must determine my choice. But all these noble aims combine to urge me to resign my canonry in order to devote myself to the care of the schools and to the training of those who will staff them.*

(10) *A final consideration is that I no longer feel any attraction for the vocation of canon: it seems as if that vocation has departed from me in anticipation of my resigning its duties. This state of life no longer suits me, and although I entered upon it by the proper way, it seems now as if God is directing me to another door whereby to leave it. The same voice which summoned me to the canonry now seems to be calling me elsewhere. I sense this new call in my innermost conscience: however I search my*

*conscience this new call is what I hear. It is true that only the hand of God which drew me to my present state in life can draw me from it. But is it not sufficiently clear that that divine hand is now pointing to another state and even taking my hand to lead me to it?*

Miguel Campos points out that the wording of the 10th article of the document carries echoes of the *Memoir of the Beginnings*. Here, as there, John Baptist evinces a deep conviction that God is arranging all things for him, is leading him by the hand. In the successive steps he has taken to associate himself with the schoolmasters, to the point of taking up residence with them in a house apart from his own, he has progressively lost all attraction for the role of canon. As he himself puts it, the vocation of canon has seemingly left him in anticipation of his leaving it.

But the process has been lengthy, and fraught with uncertainties sufficient to make his present situation a critical time of option. A previous move to quit the canonry, a move which his trusted mentor, Nicolas Roland, had convinced him was for the good of souls, had only terminated with an assurance that God had wanted him to remain a canon – an assurance which he was satisfied to find in the refusal of ecclesiastical authority, in the person of the Archbishop, to accept his resignation. The present moment of decision is more dramatic because a specific enterprise, involving a specific group of persons, is in question. If ecclesiastical authority were once again to refuse consent for the resignation of the canonry, John Baptist would accept the decision: nothing has altered in his readiness to see God's will in the external circumstances of his life. But he is so convinced, in his "*innermost conscience*", that God does, in fact, now want him to leave his canonry, that a refusal by the Archbishop would test to the utmost this belief that God expresses his will in existential circumstances which, in practice, compel acquiescence, rather than through personal intuitions which, no matter how seemingly well-founded, might still be mistaken.

In fact, signs were not lacking that the Archbishop was no more likely now to accept John Baptist's resignation than he had been seven years before. The three biographers variously interpret Maurice Le Tellier's motives for deferring the audience which Canon de La Salle sought from him, but they concur in showing that the prelate made it difficult for him to approach him and in

indicating that the Archbishop had prior information of the purpose for which an interview was sought.

The first attempt entailed a journey to Paris because the brilliant but worldly Le Tellier ("a nobleman first and a church man second", as Battersby describes him) preferred the life at court in the capital to his routine archiepiscopal duties in Rheims, and if a need to see him was at all urgent (and in Canon de La Salle's case it was becoming increasingly so) the chance of an interview in Paris was as likely as one in Rheims. But John Baptist arrived in the capital only to be told that the Archbishop had just returned to Rheims. His journey, however, was not altogether in vain, for he took the opportunity to visit his old professors at Saint-Sulpice, notably Louis Tronson, now rector of the seminary, and Jacques Bäuhin, both of whom encouraged him to persevere in his purpose. On his return to Rheims, his attempts to see the Archbishop were met with the reply that His Grace could not spare the time. Le Tellier was hoping, says Mallefer, that a delay would lead the now reluctant canon to change his mind and that thus the Rheims chapter would continue to have the services of a priest whose piety and worth were well known. Blain adds the further consideration that the Archbishop already foresaw that the resignation from the canonry might well be followed by the departure of the valued M. de La Salle from the archdiocese.

John Baptist, not yet refused because not yet interviewed, believed that the will of God allowed him still to persevere with his petition. But in order to strengthen his assurance in the midst of a growing sense of frustration, he took counsel with one Canon Philbert, Professor of Theology at the Rheims seminary, and a confidant of the Archbishop. The response gave him fresh courage. Information that Mgr. Le Tellier was about to leave Rheims for one of his prolonged visits to Paris prompted John Baptist to make yet another attempt to obtain an audience, which was again refused. All three biographers report that in this seemingly desperate situation John Baptist went into the Cathedral and remained there some hours in prayer, at the end of which he presented himself once more at the door of the episcopal residence, was admitted, and was given a favourable hearing by the Archbishop. The fact that he was able to quote the approval of Canon Philbert appears to have carried decisive weight. He returned to the rue Neuve and invited the community to join with him in singing a Te Deum. The date was 16 August 1683.

The biographers are silent on the reactions of the community to this decisive step of their leader, but it is not difficult to imagine the intensified sense of solidarity produced in them by this proof that M. de La Salle saw his own future as identified with theirs; and that his choice of life with them rather than the prestigious and lucrative life of a Rheims canon was so ungrudgingly made that he deemed it an occasion for a *Te Deum*. Was there any ambivalence in their feelings about the reduced financial resources now available to their leader? They had earlier challenged his claim to speak to them about trust in Providence whilst he was in receipt of “*a well-paid canonry*” and “*a substantial patrimony*” to guarantee him against want. But that was when they were still unsure that his role would extend beyond that of temporary benefactor and protector. If his intention was to identify himself completely with the community (to “incarnate” himself into it, as Campos’s French term has it), whatever financial means he had would, they could reasonably suppose, accrue to them as a community, according as the need arose. Perhaps at this stage they hoped he would not take what they had said about his personal fortune as literally as he had done by sacrificing the income deriving from his canonry.

But, according to Blain, he had made up his mind about this, as he had about the canonry, some considerable time before. His decision, again as Blain expresses it, was based on the words of Jesus Christ: “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor . . . and come, follow me.” John Baptist, says the biographer, wished to be perfect, and this wish made it incumbent upon him to become poor. It was, as the saying is, as simple as that! The procedure of becoming poor was all that remained to be finalised.

As has been noted earlier, the employment of the patrimony to endow the community and thereby guarantee its viability and permanence had much to commend it, even in terms of the gospel passage just quoted. As Blain says, the small band of schoolmasters, now housed at the rue Neuve and preoccupied about their material future, were the first “poor” that Providence had placed in John Baptist’s path, and who, moreover, had a special claim in that they existed as a community only for the sake of the poor whom they would continue to serve. And, after all, the enterprise needed some guarantee of subsistence: if the community did not find such a guarantee in the funds at the disposal of their leader, where would it be found? Hardly in the benefactions of other people who would

deem it incomprehensible that the founder of the enterprise had disposed of his wealth, as it must seem, without thought of the vital need of it for the work he was undertaking. Conversely, no reasonable person could possibly challenge the wisdom, or indeed the admirable detachment, of M. de La Salle if he so generously devoted his resources to the work of the schools. Nicolas Roland, so deeply admired by John Baptist, had done as much for his own enterprise. The rue Neuve community would find calm and assurance in such a move, and their vocations would be blessed with renewed stability. Such persuasive views, says Blain, were expressed to M. de La Salle “*by several persons well-known for their religious spirit*”.

But the words of Père Barré had made a profound impression on John Baptist’s mind: “*Divine Providence must be the only foundation on which to establish the work of the Christian schools. Every other means of support is inappropriate for them; but that single one is unshakable, and the schools themselves will remain unshakable so long as they have no other foundation.*” Elevated views of this kind, however, are not without danger, as Blain comments, for those who would aspire to follow them, and M. de La Salle, “*being the prudent man he was, feared the possibility of self-delusion in taking a path which few had taken before, under the pretext of seeking perfection.*” It was, in fact, yet another dilemma in the path of the Founder’s faith journey, and a prayer in which he sought enlightenment is quoted by Blain at this stage. (The same prayer is quoted, in almost identical terms, by Bernard, whose source of it may therefore well have been the *Memoir of the Beginnings*.):

“*My God, I do not know whether I should endow the work or not. It is not for me to establish communities, nor even to know how they are to be established. The task is yours, to be accomplished in whatever way you choose. I dare not endow without knowing your will in the matter. I shall therefore contribute nothing to the founding of our communities. If you found them they will be well founded. If you do not found them they will remain without foundation. I beg you to make known your will to me.*”

The prayer indicates a clear leaning towards the daring exercise in pure faith counselled by Père Barré. But just a paragraph later, Blain gives us another quotation from an exchange between John Baptist and his spiritual director on this question. In submitting his problem to M. Jacques Callou, Superior of the Rheims seminary, John Baptist expressed his personal conviction that he should freely dispose of his possessions without benefit to the enterprise of the schools. But, noting a less than enthusiastic reaction on the part of Father Callou,

he added these words: “*I shall not dispose of them thus if you do not think I should. I shall dispose of them only in accordance with your wishes. If you tell me to keep something back, be it as little as five sous, I shall do so.*”

Taken together, the last two quotations provide an insight into John Baptist’s state of mind at this juncture. He wishes to undertake God’s work in a disposition of total abandonment to the divine will, an abandonment which includes unconditional trust relating to material resources. Yet he remains open to the possibility that the heroic gesture may not, after all, be what God wants from him at this stage. In fact, however, Blain tells us that the words of the second quotation had the effect of transforming the reluctant attitude of Father Callou: in Blain’s terms, “*The humility, docility and submission reflected in what M. de La Salle said convinced the spiritual director that his inspiration was from the Holy Spirit*”. And, as it happened, an opportunity occurred almost immediately for implementing in a literal sense his gospel-inspired wish to “give to the poor”.

The year 1684 was, says Blain, “*productive of nothing but misery*” for the people of France. A prolonged drought resulted in famine, and people crowded into the city of Rheims from the surrounding countryside in search of food; normal work was brought virtually to a standstill; the price of provisions rose so steeply that people’s life-savings were quickly exhausted. These and other such details are provided by the Founder’s first biographers, especially Blain. One would like to have found corroboration from other contemporary documents, and one looked hopefully to our modern authorities on the Founder for source references. Disappointingly none are given. Rigault seems to take his information directly from Blain; and even Battersby, who can usually be counted upon to provide evidence from independent sources to verify or illuminate Institute tradition, offers none in this instance, though he does add the detail, not found in the Lasallian sources, that the winter in this year was so severe that the Seine froze from side to side. Bernard is at variance with Blain and Maillefer in giving 1685, not 1684, as the year in which John Baptist began to alleviate the sufferings of the stricken poor. Léon de Marie Aroz indicates the winter of 1683-84 as the likeliest date.

About the manner of the Founder’s distribution of his possessions during this year of economic disaster, Miguel Campos enters a correction of the impression given by Maillefer and Blain that the

disposal was literally total. Maillefer testifies: “*He distributed all his possessions to the poor . . .*” and later, for emphasis, “. . . *he gave away everything*”; Blain’s summing up is that “*he gave everything, keeping nothing back*”. The earliest biographer, Bernard, does indeed say that, on the advice of his spiritual director, and “*in order not to tempt Providence*”, he kept sufficient capital to yield an annual income of 200 livres. Campos suggests that Maillefer and Blain have been led to exaggerate by their wish to emphasise the heroic quality of the Founder’s sacrifice: they are spiritualising the deed at the expense of the historical detail of what happened. It seems corroborative of this view that neither mentions Bernard’s detail of the annual interest of 200 livres. But when it is remembered that 200 livres was (as we know from other places in the biographies) deemed the minimum sum needed for the upkeep of one Brother for a year, it would seem that Bernard’s own mention of the reserve of that meagre sum was aimed at stressing by contrast the munificence of what was given away.

At this point, Miguel Campos refers us to the researches of Léon de Marie Aroz for evidence that “the requirement of charity which led John Baptist de La Salle to dispose of his possessions in favour of the poor cannot have exceeded certain limitations pre-imposed on his generosity”. Aroz points out that John Baptist at this time still had responsibilities for the care of his younger brothers. He had legally, but temporarily, relinquished his guardianship in 1676 in order to free himself for the preoccupations of his ordination to the priesthood. But he had resumed the guardianship in 1680, and was still responsible in this year of 1684. Justice would not have allowed him to disburse funds which were needed for his three brothers, still in their minority, Jean-Louis, Pierre and Jean-Remy. But Aroz adds that if John Baptist gave only what it was in his power, in justice, to give, he gave *all*. The actual amount is of little importance in itself. “It was the intensity of the love with which he gave, that provided the theological dimension for his self-improvement.” Miguel Campos quotes this judgment of Léon Aroz and adds the interesting footnote that his confrère’s researches have incidentally brought to light evidence of disinterested acts of beneficence on the part of the Founder’s brothers and his sister Marie, and suggests that this would indicate a family predisposition towards generous charity.

The approximate amount of what John Baptist gave away can only be guessed at. Blain says that the patrimony “*approached the sum of*

*forty thousand livres*” but Battersby comments that this figure is “almost certainly wrong, and is probably a misprint for 400,000 livres. The sum of 40,000 livres would hardly have been considered a fortune in those days . . .” The difficulty about this suggestion of Bro Clair’s is that (as the facsimile edition of Blain, published in the *Cahiers Lasalliens* series, shows) the biographer wrote “. . . *quarante mille livres*”. A misprint of 40,000 for 400,000 would be more understandable than a substitution of “quarante” for “quatre cent”. Frère Emile Lett, author of *les Premiers Biographes de Saint Jean Baptiste de La Salle*, also suggests “more than 400,000 livres”, as the realistic figure and claims that the information provided by Frère Bernard justifies such an estimate. Bernard’s relevant information is as follows: “(M. de La Salle) *began therefore to distribute his possessions to the poor in the year 1685 . . . and this went on for a considerable length of time until he had very little left. Now the daily distribution of bread amounted in value to about a hundred pistoles; there were besides private donations in money . . .*” A pistole was equivalent to 10 livres, so that, according to Bernard, John Baptist’s daily distribution amounted to 1000 livres. If the famine lasted more than a year (Blain says it lasted two) Lett’s calculation seems convincing enough. But Aroz considers it to be out of the question and substantiates his view by reference to now available documentation on the Founder’s family. There is uncertainty also about what the figures mentioned would be equivalent to in modern currency. An interesting discussion relevant to this particular point can be found on pp.63-64 of *Beginnings: De La Salle and his Brothers* edited by Luke Salm FSC (Romeoville, 1980).

Incidentally, Leon de Marie Aroz has a comment on the purposes to which, according to Bernard, the annual reserve of 200 livres was put by the Founder, namely “*to make possible the long and difficult journeys he had to undertake, and also to add to the library needed by himself and the community*”; in part, also, for the maintenance of the community chapel. Aroz points out that when, thirty five years later, John Baptist felt that his life was nearing its end, he made over to his successor, Frère Barthélemy, by an act of cession dated 11 August 1718, his library which (as Aroz comments) amidst all the difficulties and disappointments he had endured, he had never ceased to add to and enrich. This prompts a further reflection on the part of Aroz, namely, that perhaps the Founder, in thus caring for his library and then formally bequeathing it to his successor, wished

by his example, rather than by specific instruction, to show what should be the ever-present concern of his community of educators; to convey the principle that schoolmasters must never cease to be students, that teaching others necessarily involves teaching oneself; in a word, to show that he wished the pursuit of knowledge and culture to be indissolubly linked with the vocation of teaching Brother.

Accepting then Frère Bernard's assurance about this insignificant reserve of 200 livres, and allowing for whatever provision he felt obliged, in justice, to make for those of his family for whom he was still responsible as guardian, we may be sure that, by the time the needs of the famine-stricken poor of Rheims had absorbed his personal resources, he was as bereft of material security as the men who had challenged his right to speak to them about trust in the providence of God. Ironically, these men now questioned the wisdom of what he had done and, according to Blain, voiced an anxiety about a future now more uncertain still, since their leader was as poor and resourceless as themselves. But he was able now, from a stronger position by far, to reassert his serene confidence in Providence on whom alone, he reminded his disciples, the community was founded. Moreover, his earlier assurances that Providence would not fail them if they kept faith, had been tested during the protracted famine and had been proved well-judged. Both Blain and Maillefer quote a statement made by the Founder to the community at this time:

*“Think back, my dear Brothers, to the trying times we have just come through. Before your eyes the famine has shown what suffering it was able to bring to the poor and what inroads it could make into the resources of the rich. This city became little more than a workhouse for the poor who flocked to it in their misery to eke out lives threatened with death by starvation. During all this time, when even the rich were unsure of finding bread to buy, so rare and precious had it become, did you go short? Thanks be to God, although we now have no revenue, nor capital to provide revenue, we have seen these two dreadful years come and go without finding ourselves lacking what was necessary. We owe nothing to anybody, though many wealthy communities have brought disaster on themselves by borrowing and by disadvantageous selling, in order to provide means of subsistence.”*

It was as he had said it would be: Providence, the community's sole foundation, had proved so soon a true foundation. And thus it

would continue so long as faith flourished as the distinguishing mark of his followers. The biographers mention in this context that the Founder used to say: *“Our Brothers will survive on condition that they remain poor. But they will lose the spirit of their state if they begin to look for things over and above what is necessary for them.”* The *événement-clef* we have considered in this chapter has demonstrated his claim to speak on such matters. He had made himself poor with the poor, for the sake of the poor. He had reached a point in his journey of faith when the road ahead was the only one that lay open to him. What that road would lead him to was still uncertain and unclear – except for the certainty and the clarity his faith gave him that Providence was guiding him – and others with him – along it, step by sure step.

## 7

# *Building Community*

Miguel Campos next focuses attention on the growing awareness of a community identity on the part of M. de La Salle and his disciples and the shaping of the small company into what, in history's perspective, was to be an enduring corporate force for the work of Christian education. Dom Elie Maillefer provides the setting initiating this development with words he uses about the life in what he calls "*the cradle of the Institute*" – the house in the rue Neuve. "*It was then,*" he says, "*that M. de La Salle began to give them a form of community; he prescribed a uniform rule for each period of the day and made silence, as it were, a basic principle . . .*" Campos quotes the authoritative view of Br. Maurice Hermans that the nature of this "*uniform rule*" may be discoverable in the 21-page manuscript of a "*Pratique Journalière*" preserved in the Institute archives. It is true that this manuscript dates only from 1713, but it is so self-evidently a revised and corrected version of an antecedent coutumier (Maurice Hermans illustrates this in his edition of the primitive texts of the Common Rule published as No. 25 in the *Cahiers Lasalliens*) that "one may, without any hesitation, recognise in it a witness to the very first customs introduced into the little community at Rheims, probably from the year 1682".

A look at *Cahier Lasallien No. 25*, therefore, affords an idea of the daily routine followed by the earliest Lasallian community. It was an austere regime. The day began at 4.30 a.m. and ended with retirement at 9.00 p.m. The sixteen and a half hours included four and a half of spiritual exercises, seven of school work, including preparation and study, one and a half of meals, and two of recreation. The balance of school work with spiritual exercises indicated from the beginning the specific nature of the community as a group of men dedicated to a teaching apostolate for which they derived their inspiration and spiritual strength from the liturgy and from a prayer-life communal and personal. The benign presence and example of their leader, sharing to the full in the life of his disciples, had much to do with their generous response. The reminiscences on which the biographers drew, provide an image of John Baptist unfailingly present at the community exercises and ready, as need

arose, to share the work of the classroom, at the same time shaping, by his day to day advice, a pedagogy which quickly proved its validity in the exterior success observable in the work of the schools. His disciples' eagerness to emulate his own penitential practices was kept in check by him because he was concerned, says Bernard, "*that they should not weaken themselves for their work in school*".

Campos has an enlightening comment on the Founder's corporal mortifications on which the source-biographies dwell at some length and in detail for this period in his life. Even these practices, he suggests, were directed towards building community. Mortifications and prolonged prayer were seen, in 17th century French spirituality, to be the indispensable but sure means of obtaining from God the inspiration and light needed at moments of decision. In John Baptist's case, says Campos, his mortifications must be seen in the context of the singleness of purpose which animated him at this period of gestation in the life of the new community, his preoccupation to discern God's will and to accomplish it fully and unconditionally.

It was a further sign of the Founder's conviction that prayer and self-denial are a necessary preparation for productive decision-making that when he deemed the time had come to convene a formal assembly of the "principal Brothers", he invited them to inaugurate this with a retreat, "*in order,*" says Bernard, "*to draw down upon themselves all those graces of the Holy Spirit without which they would be unable to take any wise measures for the future, but with which they would be able to resolve whatever difficulties arose in the course of their meeting.*"

The three biographers are at variance in the detail of their accounts of this deliberative assembly in the history of the Institute. Br. Maurice Hermans has made a study of the divergences, published in *Cahier Lasallien No. 2* and his analysis and proposed solutions make interesting reading. Here it must suffice to accept, with Miguel Campos, as reasonably established, the information on which his thesis is based at this point. M. de La Salle convoked, for Pentecost 1686, an assembly of Brothers representing not only the base-community in Rheims itself, but also the small outposts of Rethel, Guise and Laon established by Adrien Nyel, who had gone back to Rouen in October 1685.

The decision to hold this assembly signifies, as Campos points out, that John Baptist saw himself as a fellow-member of a community rather than as a superior in charge. The future of the small band of

disciples was not now the concern of himself only, nor even of himself in consultation with the rue Neuve community, but the concern of all. And this first assembly crystallized the growing realisation among these earliest Lasallians that henceforth their individual existence was bound up with the corporate existence of a society whose destiny was, under Providence, the responsibility of each. It was their moment of recognition and acceptance that their personal itineraries had come to a point of juncture, each with that of the others, all with that of M. de La Salle. The latter, who had reached that moment of recognition long before, confirmed their understanding in an exhortation which he delivered to them on the eve of their deliberations and of which Blain has preserved (no doubt in his own words) the following fragment:

*“You will discover your life’s work in the book of regulations which will be drawn up here; and the rules which it will contain will appear acceptable to you because you yourselves will be the legislators. You have reached the point to which I wished to bring you. And now, as I observe your fervour and your pious dispositions, I wish to take steps to consolidate your situation, to confirm your sense of vocation, to strengthen your fraternal union, and to begin the construction of the edifice of which you are the foundation stones.”*

On these words it may be said that the rules which were to be formulated by the assembly would be none other than the regulating customs which had developed among John Baptist’s disciples in the process of living together during the previous four years. As Michel Sauvage and Miguel Campos comment in their 1977 study of the Founder’s spirituality, *Annoncer l’Evangile aux Pauvres*, the regulations drawn up at this first Institute assembly “were not imposed from outside the community. They expressed and regularised a lifestyle which the Brothers had already been practising. They gave form to an intention to live in accordance with the tenets of the gospel. They consolidated a situation and ensured stability in providing a formula for an evangelical undertaking already entered into. The act of ‘codification’ was the arrival-point of procedures already tested; its effect was to unify with a view to further development. . .”

An element of “further development” emerged already before the termination of the assembly. M. de La Salle proposed to the Brothers the idea of reinforcing the stability of their community by binding themselves by vow. The impulse of their first fervour

prompted a generous response: they would make the three classic vows of the religious life – thereby placing themselves, from this earliest formalisation of their common enterprise, in the tradition of the canonical religious congregations – and they would bind themselves for life. The response was at least a spontaneous gesture of total confidence in John Baptist’s leadership, but he would not have seen it in that way, and his own response, in turn, was to moderate their ardour and advise that they bind themselves only by a temporary vow of obedience, to be renewed annually.

This 1686 assembly was notable for a further reason. The biographers place in its context the first attempt of M. de La Salle to surrender the superiorship of the community to one of its members. They concur in interpreting this gesture as a manifestation of the Founder’s humility and of his desire to be able to fulfil the vow of obedience which he, too, had pronounced. But Miguel Campos would have us see more in it than just that. John Baptist, he says, wished to educate the Brothers to being able to do without himself; he wished, even at this early stage in the community’s life, to set in motion the generating principle of that life without being himself an indispensable participant. In a word, he wished his disciples already to take their destiny into their own hands. He believed it to be a stultifying anomaly that an enterprise which they had shared with him thus far, and to the realisation of which they had made a contribution, should continue to leave them with no responsibility for its continuance and survival. The assembly yielded to his arguments and elected Brother Henri L’Heureux in his place. But the new situation was of brief duration: the idea of a cleric, and one of such distinction as M. de La Salle, obeying a layman as a superior, constituted another shock to the sensibilities of the Rheims haut-monde. Complaints reached the ecclesiastical authorities and the status quo was soon restored. Relief was felt by the Brothers – by none more than the embarrassed Henri L’Heureux – and John Baptist again accepted the intervention of higher authority as a sign that God did not yet deem the moment ripe for the kenotic gesture he had wished to make.

The year following this first assembly, 1687, is significant for the history of education as well as for the internal history of what the biographers now refer to as M. de La Salle’s “little congregation”; but the development which took place is of particular interest for our

present study because it demonstrates once again the idea of community as understood by the Founder. Bernard tells us that several country parish priests, having heard of the good being done by the newly established "Christian Schools", petitioned M. de La Salle for the services of a Brother for their rural parish. M. de La Salle, says Bernard, felt bound to give a negative response to such petitions "*because he could only provide two Brothers together, since they were obliged to live in community.*" The disappointed curés continued to press their requests and a compromise solution was reached, with John Baptist agreeing to lodge gratis at the rue Neuve, and to train in the art of teaching, selected young men sent to him by their pastors. A section of the house was set apart for the purpose and one of the Brothers was given responsibility for their direction; the number of students quickly rose to twenty-five. This establishing of a "*Séminaire de maîtres d'écoles pour la campagne*" has been accepted by historians of education as the pioneer work in the field of teacher-training (the claims of the only rival, Charles Démiá, having been frequently and sympathetically examined but finally disallowed). Miguel Campos would have us note that the innovatory concept was not the product of an inspired creative insight, but of a pragmatic need to resolve a tension occurring between the plight of the isolated village parishes (whose children, no less than those of the cities, cried out to hear the good news of salvation) and John Baptist's deepset conviction that the community principle was integral to the life of his "little congregation" of Brothers.

One further development at this time is recorded by all three biographers, one which again was in no way due to an initiative of John Baptist but which was the product of his response to what he deemed to be an encouraging intervention of Providence. Some boys of no more than fifteen years of age (presumably pupils or former pupils of the Rheims schools) applied to be admitted to the community. John Baptist's first reaction was to refuse, fearing, says Blain, that these lads "*would introduce a schoolboy spirit*" into the rue Neuve establishment. But their persistence and apparent seriousness finally won him over and he organized a separate routine for them "*appropriate,*" says Blain again, "*to their age. . . but with a view to nourishing their vocation and preparing them for the ministry of the Brothers.*" The same biographer goes into detail about the programme the Founder devised for them and describes it as "*one calculated to inspire devotion and a spirit of prayer without overfacing them*

*or causing them boredom with a succession of spiritual exercises too serious, too long and too concentrating. . .*” In the Founder’s view they were “*tender plants to be cultivated with care*”. Bernard adds the detail that the number of these young postulants soon reached a dozen or so.

## 8

### *The Move to the Capital*

The next significant advance in the community's development towards maturity was the extension of the work to Paris. When Archbishop Le Tellier had become aware of John Baptist's intentions in this regard he had made overtures to retain the Brothers exclusively within his own diocese of Rheims, offering financial resources and diocesan status. The biographers variously interpret the Founder's motives for respectfully declining the Archbishop's offers: M. de La Salle wished to honour an assurance he had some years previously given to the parish priest of Saint-Sulpice that he would one day provide Brothers for the school there; Père Barré had convinced him that a move to the metropolis was in accordance with God's plans; the already-founded schools in Rheims and the nearby towns were producing so much good that it would not be right to restrict the expansion of the work; the capital was the necessary centre from which the work could radiate throughout the rest of France; and, more personally, John Baptist welcomed an opportunity to withdraw himself from the inhibiting influences of his native city. Blain is the only one to add considerations which modern commentators believe went closest to the heart of the matter. *"The city of Rheims,"* wrote the official biographer, *"which had given birth to the enterprise, would have become its tomb if it had remained within its bounds. The Society would not have been able to live according to its own rules, being subjected to whatever prescriptions successive ecclesiastical superiors would choose to impose. How many times it would have experienced changes of this kind without ever being able to establish unvarying rules for itself? Still less would it have been able to envisage status as a religious Congregation, its constitutions approved by Rome and the vows of religion pronounced under the same authority. The Superior of the Institute would have remained dependent on the changing attitudes of individual pastors, not necessarily sympathetic to him, and his Brothers' confidence in him would have been shaken and his authority weakened."*

In other words (as expressed by Miguel Campos) the autonomy of the developing society was in question: to have accepted Archbishop Le Tellier's offers would have been to put at risk the community's independence vis-a-vis its own future. Moreover, John Baptist had

reached, as we have seen, the profound conviction that the work was to be founded on Providence alone: the financial security proposed by Le Tellier and intended as an inducement was, in John Baptist's logic, a persuasive reason for a negative response. Incidentally Campos comments also on the significance of this shift in the relationship between the Founder and the Archbishop. His deference to Le Tellier's wishes had been exemplified in the two initiatives towards resigning the canonry. But now his commitment to the viability and consolidation of the community was the overriding consideration in all his procedures, and although, as Bernard says, "*he listened respectfully to the gracious proposals of the prelate and expressed the utmost gratitude and humble appreciation of the kindnesses he wished to bestow,*" he presented his motives for refusal so convincingly that, in Maillefer's words, "*the prelate appeared to approve his reasons and spoke no more about the matter*".

Leaving the direction of the Rheims community in the capable hands of Henri L'Heureux, John Baptist set off for the capital, accompanied by two Brothers of proven teaching ability, arriving on 24th February 1688. It was, says Campos, "a journey into an uncertain future, into a future made up of responses to new needs, of misunderstandings, of persecutions even . . ." and monitored at every stage by a single-minded determination to maintain the enterprise in the line traced out for it by Providence, and sustained by an unwavering confidence that the same Providence, which was the only foundation of the work, would not fail him.

He placed himself and his two disciples at the disposal of the parish priest of Saint-Sulpice, Claude de la Barmondière. The situation was new to John Baptist's experience in that he was being asked, not to establish a school where none had existed before, but to bring aid to one which functioned badly. The tall gaunt building on the rue Princesse, to the north of the church of Saint-Sulpice, housed two hundred pupils whom the priest in charge, the Abbé Compagnon, helped by a weaving instructor and a boy monitor, was failing utterly to keep in order, let alone educate. It was, to say the least, a disconcerting state of affairs for John Baptist, but his tolerance and tactful consideration were admirably brought to bear in a manner described by Maillefer: "*His religious spirit and patience were severely tried. But he contented himself at this early stage with exhorting his two companions to bide their time and not become discouraged by the difficulties facing them. He told them that there was reason to hope that the problems*

*would sort themselves out with time. . . He knew indeed what was needed to put things right, but he held back out of consideration for M. Compagnon's feelings, not wishing to suggest any changes which would cause the abbé embarrassment. . . Moreover, he hoped that by pointing out, with the utmost discretion, the disadvantages of the existing routine of the school, he would bring the abbé himself to improve things, and that thus the school would begin to function well without its being apparent that he himself had anything to do with the improvement.''*

John Baptist was, in fact, well aware that Compagnon considered that he and the two Brothers had come to Saint-Sulpice merely to help him in his unequal struggle with the unruly children, but not to take over the direction of the school. The fact that he was willing to go along with this ambivalent situation for several weeks – and in the constructive way suggested by Maillefer's assessment – speaks as much for his conviction that a beginning in Paris was now timely for his society, as for his patient forbearance. But when, in due course, the parish priest formally requested him to assume full responsibility for the direction of the rue Princesse establishment, the changes he felt in conscience obliged to introduce inevitably ruffled sensibilities. Changes like the organisation of a fixed timetable, the introduction of a daily catechism lesson, daily attendance at Mass for all pupils, insistence on silence at certain times – all of which produced a marked improvement in the behaviour of the pupils and in the ethos of the school – could not fail, despite the tactfulness of John Baptist's procedures, to seem a standing reproach for M. Compagnon. The weaving instructor, Rafrond by name, was deeply offended by John Baptist's decision to reduce the time hitherto spent by the pupils in manufacturing articles which Rafrond was allowed to sell for his personal profit. Rafrond was aware that the parish priest had previously supported the use of the workshop for the pupils on the grounds that they would thus learn good habits of industry. But his complaints to La Barmondière about the new superintendent's curtailment of this activity fell on deaf ears, because the curé could see only too well the improvements that were taking place in the principal activities of the school. Rafrond withdrew his services in the hope of forcing the curé's hand, but John Baptist thereupon showed that he intended the trade teaching to continue in the programme by inviting Rafrond to teach his skills to one of the Brothers.

The rest of this part of the story is a sad affair of criticism and calumny, initiated by Compagnon and Rafrond and fostered (says

Blain with a nice touch of irony) by the parish association of charitable ladies – a campaign which achieved its purpose of causing M. de La Barmondière to suggest to M. de La Salle that it would be better for the peace of the parish if he were to return with his Brothers to Rheims. John Baptist accepted the suggestion without demur and proceeded to make preparations for the withdrawal. In due course, manifesting not the slightest acrimony, he called on the parish priest to take formal leave, his whole demeanour expressing courtesy and respect. La Barmondière, whose personal qualities of piety and integrity are vouched for by Blain, knew a saint when he saw one, and he changed his mind and asked for time to think over the matter. Again John Baptist reacted graciously and agreed to continue the work for as long as the services of himself and his Brothers were required.

Three months later La Barmondière resigned as parish priest and was succeeded by Henri Baudrand who promptly manifested his confidence in M. de La Salle by diplomatically promoting Compagnon to the administration of the parish liturgy, thus diverting him from further harassment of the patient men at the rue Princesse. And just one year later, in January 1690, he requested John Baptist to provide Brothers for a second parish school in the rue du Bac, a request unhesitatingly agreed to by the Founder who summoned Brothers from Rheims to take up the new responsibilities. Between the two schools, some five hundred boys were now receiving the beneficent influence of the saint's pedagogy.

What perhaps impresses most as one reads the details of this episode, as recounted by Blain and Maillefer, is the total flexibility shown by John Baptist amidst the jostling to which he was subjected during these first months in Paris. He evinced no great hurry to take over the full direction of the rue Princesse school, seeming content to provide assistance for the incompetent M. Compagnon, and concerned to avoid upsetting the latter in the process. When asked to assume full charge of the school he agreed because he believed he should defer to the parish priest's authority. He took no apparent umbrage at the campaign of criticism, and even vilification, that was launched against him, but with the support of his two disciples continued to work a visible transformation in the school. When the misled M. de La Barmondière asked him to withdraw there was no sign of dudgeon, and when the parish priest changed his mind and asked him to stay, he and his Brothers merely unpacked their few

belongings and resumed work in the schools. It is all deeply edifying but, more significantly, it helps us to appreciate more fully the motivation of the adamant inflexibility which he was now about to manifest in face of a suggestion of M. Baudrand – of that same parish priest who had treated him more graciously than the vacillating La Barmondière had done.

Baudrand's suggestion sprang from his dissatisfaction with the garb the Brothers had adopted, a strange-looking melange, designed rather to show what the wearers were not – neither priests nor secular persons – than what they were. People in the street were openly laughing at the calf-length robe, the broad-brimmed hat, the serge stockings, the mantle with its no-purpose sleeves. A shame, thought the parish priest, that the splendid work being accomplished in the two Saint-Sulpice schools should be associated in the public's mind with such a bizarre costume: normal clerical dress would be much more appropriate! And M. Baudrand, as Blain makes clear, felt that, as curé of such an important parish, a benefactor who had given the new society a firm foothold in the capital city, he had a right to expect M. de La Salle to yield to his wishes in this matter.

But John Baptist saw the intervention in a different light, well expressed by Michel Sauvage in a passage of his work *Catéchèse et Laïcat*, quoted here by Miguel Campos: "It was a question not of a mere form of dress but of a principle, that of the internal autonomy of the community. The Brothers were indeed collaborators of the parish priests in the sphere of the apostolate, and were subject to their authority in that domain; but in matters of internal organisation they were independent. There could be no question of allowing any parish priest to interfere with that organisation. The cohesion of the community and, in the final analysis, the success of the apostolate, demanded intransigence in the matter".

But John Baptist was not content merely to adopt an intransigent stance – a "take us as we are or let us go elsewhere" attitude. He paid his parish priest and benefactor the courtesy of composing a closely-argued memoir, explaining why he could not accede to the proposal for a change in the Brothers' habit. The care which John Baptist brought to the composition of this memoir can be discerned from the manuscript in his handwriting which the Institute is fortunate to possess. It is obviously a first draft, not the fair copy which, presumably, was handed to M. Baudrand. The numerous erasures

and alterations visible in the extant manuscript betoken the care and effort expended on what its author clearly saw to be an important statement at this moment in the community's development, a statement of which Maurice Hermans has written that "it does more than expound the reasons why the distinctive habit must be retained: it constitutes at several points a judicious recapitulation of the community's conditions of existence and an adumbration of the status to which the community was entitled to aspire".

Miguel Campos quotes this assessment by Hermans and then continues: "The arguments presented by the memoir are not the product of a theory but the record of an experience which John Baptist had lived through for now several years. They are firmly based on what he had observed and evaluated at first hand. The text represents the crystallisation of an experiment in community living, and by that very fact it provides a revelation of the Founder's personal religious development. In this document John Baptist de La Salle appears clearly as a man totally dedicated to the service of a lay community which has its *raison d'être* in the welfare of the poor. He demonstrates by the assurance of his arguments that the 'Community' (the Founder's only term throughout the document, where it appears forty times, for the young Society as a whole) is God's work, and that the sum of his own energies must accordingly be applied to the task of maintaining it in the line willed by God, leaving himself open meanwhile to the further guidance and protection of providence." Such an assessment is the basis of Campos's choice of the *Memoir on the Habit* as a *parole-force* for this stage of John Baptist's faith-journey, and our guide now proceeds to analyse and comment upon the document in that perspective.

## *The Memoir on the Habit*

The Founder's own heading for the document is descriptive: "*Whether it is appropriate to change or to keep the habit which the Brothers of the Community of the Christian Schools wear at present.*" But the sub-heading he gives to the opening section shows that the issue he is taking up has wider implications: "*On the nature of this Community, and who they are who compose it.*"\* And his inaugural statement is already enlightening on his understanding of the nature of the work God had called him to do:

*"This Community is usually called the Community of the Christian Schools, and at present is founded only on Providence. Those who live in it keep a Rule and are dependent for everything, having no personal property, and observe complete uniformity."*

The presentation of the Community as "*founded only on Providence*", comments Campos, is in the first place a declaration of the status, as yet unofficial, of the Community. But more significantly it points to a characteristic and essential trait of this congregation: its existence is not the result of a human initiative but only of an intervention of Providence: it is God who has founded it, not a man. It is reasonable to perceive a close link between this insight and the personal experience of John Baptist as revealed to us in the *Memoir of the Beginnings*. It was God alone, "*who directs all things with wisdom and gentleness*", who had raised up the Community and given it cohesion and identity. John Baptist had not, as he understood it, founded the Community: he had simply accepted to do what God willed him to do, as each step was made known to him.

The mention, thus early in the document, that the members of the Community "*keep a Rule*" is a reference, of course, to what had been approved four years earlier at the rue Neuve assembly, but its meaning goes deeper: it signifies that the Community is a meeting-point of men who possess no personal goods and have no human guarantees of security, but who have elected, because of their faith in

\*Quotations from the document are given throughout this chapter in the translation by Bro. Clair Battersby who included the *Memoir* in his *De La Salle: Letters and Documents* (1952).

God, to “*observe complete uniformity*” so as to educate one another in sharing the teaching mission of their Lord and Saviour.

In his next statement John Baptist specifies the details of the Community’s mission:

*“The members of this Community are occupied in teaching in gratuitous schools, in towns only, and in teaching catechism every day, even on Sundays and feasts.”*

In this affirmation again (continues Campos) the conscience of M. de La Salle is clearly revealed. It is integral to the Community’s *raison d’être* that its members receive no personal payment for their work, that they bring the good news of salvation to the poor freely – as freely as Jesus Christ himself had brought it. The passage reveals also John Baptist’s concern to draw attention to the identifying feature of the work thus gratuitously accomplished: the task was to be carried out in schools, and this presupposed both stability and continuity. And the apostolic aim is no less firmly defined: the pupils of these schools are to be trained in the Christian faith through what, therefore, is to be considered the principal occupation – catechetical instruction every day.

The mention “*in towns only*” has also significance. John Baptist had refused to send Brothers individually to rural parishes, but he had established in Rheims a training-college to provide for this need, independently of the Community’s own urban apostolate. In his understanding, the effectiveness and continuity of the schools’ mission depended on the depth of community life lived by the teachers, on the degree of spiritual and professional formation mutually cultivated in a communitarian setting. His teachers were men of faith; but they became better teachers in a community of faith, helping one another to live disinterestedly according to agreed rules, their attention centred on God’s purpose in their lives.

Interestingly, it is the project for the training of teachers for the rural parishes which is mentioned next in the *Memoir*:

*“Care is given also to the training of teachers for country districts, in a house separate from the community, and which is called a seminary. Those who are trained there remain only a few years until they are fully prepared both with regard to piety and their work. They are taught singing, reading and writing perfectly. They have board and lodging and laundry free. In due course they are placed in a hamlet or village as clerks, and when they have secured a post, they have no further connection with*

*the Community except in so far as is polite and becoming. They are, however, welcomed back for the purpose of making retreats.”*

In placing this information so early in his apologia, John Baptist manifests his personal high evaluation of this offshoot of the Community's apostolic endeavour. But he is also showing that though the training of the lay-teachers for the one-man schools in the rural areas is dictated by the indispensable need for community life in the Brothers' calling, it is the influence of that community life which reaches out to the country children through the men who have absorbed something of the spirit which animates the Community. Significant in this connection is the detail that the trainee-teachers "*have board and lodging and laundry free*". The principle of gratuity is operative here, as elsewhere, for the Community is founded on Providence alone.

Next in the *Memoir* comes a reference to the young people who, back in Rheims, had expressed a wish to join the Community and whom John Baptist, responding to what he believed to be a providential indication, had formed into a third community within the rue Neuve property:

*“In this Community also are trained youths who have intelligence and some disposition to piety, when they are judged suitable, and when they themselves apply to enter the Community. They are received from the age of fourteen or over. They are formed to the practice of mental prayer and the other exercises of piety. They are instructed in all that is contained in the catechism, and they are taught to read and write perfectly. These youths, who are trained and brought up in the Community, have house, oratory, exercises, board and recreation separate. Their exercises are different and are proportioned to the present development of their minds and to what they will have to do in the future.”*

The impression left by these lines (suggests Campos) is that John Baptist accepted persons so young (provided they were judged suitable and had spontaneously expressed the wish to join the Community) because he considered them already capable of developing a sense of community essential "*to what they will have to do in the future*"

In thus listing the name and purpose of the Community and the nature of its activities, the Founder was declaring that the little congregation of the Christian Schools already possessed a sense of identity, a consciousness of autonomous corporate existence. The members, he was saying, constituted a living unity, expressing itself

in a mission proper to itself. We notice that so far there is no mention of the “habit”, despite the purpose of the document as set down in its heading. The essential truth to be established, before what he says about the habit can carry credibility, is that it is an established community which has consciously and deliberately adopted the garb which the parish priest deems unacceptable. And in this connection, it was important for M. Baudrand, and anyone else who might have occasion to read the *Memoir*, to realise from the beginning that M. de La Salle drafted his defence as a member of the Community rather than as its superior (the term “I” appears nowhere throughout the document). It was true that he was the recognised head and it had fallen to him in that capacity to write the *Memoir*; but he was not defending a personal choice, with undertones of aggrieved self-importance. He was voicing the will of the Community, of an autonomous body of men, established and sustained by a Providence whose instrument he was.

The lay character of the Community is next emphasised:

*“Those who compose this community are all laymen, without classical studies, and of little culture. Providence permitted that some of those who applied, who had received the tonsure or who had begun their humanities, failed to remain.”*

The lay status of the Brothers’ vocation has been the object of much study in recent times, and Miguel Campos refers us at this point to such major contributions as Michel Sauvage’s *Catéchèse et Laïcat* and an extended article in *Lasallianum I* by G. Sanchez-Moreno Izaguirre FSC. Campos’s own comment centres on the Founder’s phrase just quoted, “*without classical studies*”, a phrase, he suggests, hardly to be taken as an apologia for ignorance from a man who was known to be insistent on professional competence for his group of schoolmasters. It was meant only to convey that the Brothers were unambitious laymen who aspired not at all to making their mark in either a secular or an ecclesiastical career.

The text expands on this question:

*“Youths who have started their humanities, however, will not be refused, but they will be received only on condition that they give up the study of the classics because, in the first place, this will not be necessary for them; secondly, because it might subsequently become an enticement for them to leave their state; and thirdly, because the community exercises and the occupation of teaching require one’s whole attention.”*

It would be regrettable and misleading, says Campos, to read these

words of the *Memoir* simply in the negative sense to which, it must be admitted, they lend themselves. John Baptist was himself a lifelong devotee of study, and believed that such devotion should characterise his Brothers. It would be contrary to the evidence of his life and writings to reduce this part of the document to a claim that the Founder wished to keep his Brothers in ignorance so that they would not be tempted to leave their vocation. He was too convinced that each of them, no less than himself, had a personal “itinerary” to follow under God’s guidance, for him to impose restraints on them of such a kind. No, says Campos, John Baptist, in the words just quoted, is stressing the totality of the commitment which his men have voluntarily accepted. Community living, entered into for a common mission, requires singleness of purpose: to be a Brother of the Christian Schools (the reader of the *Memoir* was to understand) meant having a unique, indivisible identity. It must have seemed a bold claim so early in the history of the community, but John Baptist’s experience of the ways of Providence was its firm basis.

Campos detects in the clause, “. . . because the community exercises and the occupation of teaching require one’s whole attention”, an early, indirect enunciation of a principle which came to be seen as a cornerstone of the Founder’s understanding of the nature of the Brothers’ vocation. Already he is here linking the spiritual exercises and the school duties in a unified entity demanding the Brother’s total preoccupation. The exercises have for their purpose the preservation and strengthening of the evangelical dimension in the work of the school; the school work gives expression to the evangelical inspiration and becomes thereby an extension of Christ’s teaching ministry. The principle would find a later and better-known formulation in the recommendation of the *Collection of Short Treatises*: “Do not discriminate between the particular duties of your state and those which refer to your salvation and perfection. Be convinced that you will never effect your salvation more assuredly, or acquire greater perfection than by fulfilling well the duties of your state, provided you do so with the view of doing the will of God.”

Only at this point, when he has delineated the specific and inalienable characteristics of the Community of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, demonstrating its unique nature both as to its religious inspiration and its apostolic mission, does John Baptist broach the subject of the habit worn by his disciples. He begins with a simple but detailed description of the “*distinctive*” dress, dwelling

in particular on the motives which had prompted the adoption of the unusual type of mantle – what the *Memoir* variously calls the “*casaque*” or the “*capote*”. But the net effect (and intention) of this description, according to Campos’s reading, is to stress the identity of a calling to a particular task. It was the “*capote*” which (according to Bernard) the Founder, after considerable hesitation, had given his disciples in response to their “*insistent requests that he should choose a form of dress that would distinguish them altogether from secular persons*”. And the idea of adopting the clerical mantle in response to those requests, an idea which had exercised the Founder’s mind for some length of time, was finally rejected both for practical reasons indicated in the *Memoir*, and because, wearing such a mantle, the Brothers “*would have seemed to be fashionably dressed clerics when they were not clerics at all*”. The vocation of the Brothers of the Christian Schools was distinct from that of secular persons and from that of clerics; the habit they wore, correspondingly distinct (to the point of seeming bizarre) from both a secular and a clerical style of dress, symbolised and proclaimed the fact. God had brought into existence this body of men single-mindedly dedicated to the task of mediating salvation to the poor through education. Their garb served as a constant reminder of the fact to its wearers, and challenged others gradually to accept as providential a phenomenon which they had not yet understood. And the *Memoir* comments apropos:

*“In all communities where the members have no personal belongings and practise uniformity in everything, as in that of the Christian Schools, the habit is either distinctive from the beginning or becomes so eventually. It seems more appropriate for the good of the community that the habit should be distinctive from the beginning, rather than that it should become so later, because it is then not so easily changed and because the habit which has always been distinctive takes away all enticement to adopt the fashion and manners of dress of the people of the world.”*

If certain passages of the *Memoir* like the last clause of the extract just quoted, seem to suggest that the Founder is concerned to keep his men insulated against all temptations to leave their vocation, and that he is advocating a community defensively closed in upon itself, contrary evidence, as Miguel Campos points out, is to be found in the dynamism already manifested in the growth and success of the schoolwork and in the initiative of the teacher-training. If, again, the wording of the *Memoir* here and there conveys, at first sight, an impression of simple men being *constrained* to remain true to their

vocation, such an impression, suggests Campos, is invalidated by a deeper study of the text against the background of its historical setting, of what the biblical scholar would call its "Sitz im Leben". The *Memoir* is describing a process of stabilisation in the transition of the Community from a group of modestly-salaried schoolmasters to a society rapidly accumulating the characteristics of traditional religious life. The uniform and unique style of dress that had been adopted was, in the Founder's argument, a psychological aid to developing in its wearers a sense of stability, of steadfastness, in the challenging process in which they were caught up. That it was not seen as a "constraint", or certainly not effective as such, was only too evident from the number of withdrawals from the Community which provided a cause for concern for John Baptist at this time.

A further point made by Campos is that the element of "separation from the world" which figures in the argumentation of the *Memoir* is not to be read as an adverse value judgement on the world. Paradoxically, the Brothers observed "separation from the world" in order to be better fitted to exercise a function within the world. The habit they wore manifested to the world that they were not motivated in their task by worldly considerations. The habit was their way of saying to the world what St. Paul had said to the Ephesian elders at Miletus: "I coveted no-one's gold or silver or apparel. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. In all things I have shown you that by so toiling one must help the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

A section of the *Memoir* which has drawn criticism in the past, and which is not calculated to find an immediate sympathetic response in today's world, is one headed, "*On changes in general*". At face value the views here expressed by John Baptist seem to reflect the kind of inflexibility of character which provoked hostility in his lifetime. Thus he writes:

*"There are few changes which are not prejudicial to a community, particularly when it is a question of matters in the least degree important. Changes are always a mark of inconstancy and of little stability. Stability, however, in practices, customs and points of rule, appears to be one of the chief supports of a community. One change opens the doors to others, and ordinarily leaves a bad impression on the minds of all, or at least some, of the members of the community. Most of the disorders and irregularities in*

*a community come from a too great facility with which changes are admitted.”*

Miguel Campos deems it appropriate to dwell on the inflexibility suggested by such asseverations because, in his view, this characteristic is not marginal to the *Memoir* but a central concept. But his discussion serves to show the positive aspect of the Founder's attitude in this, and to demonstrate convincingly that to equate his inflexibility with self-opinionated stubbornness (as some of his opponents pretended to in his lifetime) is to misread his meaning totally. The details of John Baptist's personal history up to the point of his composing the *Memoir on the Habit* provide a sequence of dramatic changes to which he had constructively yielded in the firm conviction that such mutations were directed by Providence. The community itself was the product of a series of developments, each of which constituted a species of change. Neither John Baptist nor the Brothers excluded the possibility of change; but no change, whether prompted by circumstances exterior to the community or by developments within, was admitted without long deliberation aided by prayer and penance. In fact, the seeming finality of the passage just quoted is immediately qualified by these further words of the same section:

*“Hence it is a maxim accepted by all those who have some experience of community life that, before allowing any change to be introduced, it is essential to give the matter serious thought and examine with care the good or evil effects which may result; but having once allowed a thing to be established, it is necessary to be very circumspect in order not to overthrow it, except through an unavoidable necessity.”*

The *Memoir*, then, is not to be read as a “no-change” manifesto, the product of a closed mentality. Its argument is conducted specifically on the question of the religious habit and the change proposed by the parish priest of Saint-Sulpice. This happened to be a change which neither John Baptist nor his disciples deemed to be desirable at that point in the Community's development. The Founder's intransigence in this matter derived its strength simply from his experience of God's will from the beginnings of the community, and from the profound sense of responsibility that had developed in him for keeping the enterprise of the Christian Schools true to the divine intention. In defending the claims of his Brothers and himself in the matter of the habit he was defending the work of God as he understood it. And, as Blain is at pains to point out,

worried to find himself in disagreement with his parish priest and benefactor, he did not fail to consult persons of known wisdom and disinterestedness, like M. Tronson and M. Bäuhin (both conveniently at hand in the nearby seminary), who advised him to remain firm. To arrive at a valid assessment of John Baptist's attitude in this matter we need to substitute the word "fidelity" for the word "intransigence" or its synonym "inflexibility". The Founder believed, and his advisers believed with him, that fidelity to God's purpose and fidelity to the persons involved in that purpose – the Brothers and the poor whom the Brothers were called to serve – required him to resist a change which did not tally with what his experience had shown him and which he saw as a danger to the enterprise.

The *Memoir on the Habit*, concludes Miguel Campos, was a defence of the *raison d'être* of a living community, a community in process of building structures for the sole purpose of rendering to God's people the service God called for. In this sense the *Memoir* gave thematic form to a development extending over a period of almost nine years, from the first encounter between John Baptist and Adrien Nyel down to the arrival in Paris. From the beginnings the random group of schoolmasters, untrained and unorganised, had been influenced by the successive procedures of M. de La Salle, himself responding at every step to what he had discerned to be God's purpose. The needs of the group and the lack of schools for the poor had brought him gradually to the recognition that he was the one chosen by Providence to meet those needs. From the humblest beginnings, the community had progressively assumed a structured form, with rules, vows (still, of course, only private in status, but pronounced with total acceptance of their binding nature), a distinctive habit, an original nomenclature. Far from inhibiting the apostolic effort, these structures, developed from within the Community itself and not imposed from above, had enabled the Brothers to recognise themselves as a community of laymen summoned by God to devote (in the etymological sense of that word) their energies and gifts to the fulfilment of a common mission, the establishing and directing of schools for the poor, in total abandonment to the will of Providence, in total detachment from considerations of personal advantage. The choice of the particular form of dress to be worn, uniformly, by the members of this community, was a carefully considered and deliberate choice, a "structure" needed for a purpose which only those who chose it could appreciate. Its critics knew nothing of the

experience which had led to this choice, and it is not surprising that they found the result eccentric. The Community was a new phenomenon in the history of salvation. People must come to recognise this fact, and their gradual acceptance of the garb symbolising the uniqueness of the foundation would be a help to that end. But to change it now and to substitute for it the recognised clerical dress which was proposed, would remove an element from the carefully-balanced structure of the whole, and the future of the enterprise would be at least impaired, if not completely jeopardised.

It was because John Baptist perceived these implications more sharply than anyone that he took such pains to answer the objections of Henri Baudrand, and it is because the answer derived from its writer's profound experience of God's intervention in his own life that the resulting *Memoir on the Habit* can be seen, in accord with Miguel Campos's thesis, as a *parole-force* telling us much about a particular stage in our Saint's spiritual journey.

## 10

### *From Community to Society*

The hostile attitude of M. Compagnon and the dissatisfaction of M. Baudrand with the Brothers' garb were only two of the problems, and not the most worrying, that confronted John Baptist during the early years in the capital. In particular, not long after his departure from Rheims a counter-current to his hopes and plans developed in a growing number of withdrawals from the Community and a lack of applications to join. According to Blain, the situation towards the end of 1690 had reached crisis proportions. When he set off for Paris in 1688 the Founder left behind in Rheims a community of sixteen Brothers together with the joint communities of the student-teachers and the young aspirants, comprising some fifty persons in all. The general direction had been entrusted to Henri L'Heureux, but when the Founder had sufficiently settled in Paris he decided to call L'Heureux to the capital with a view to preparing him for the priesthood. (The idea of resigning the superiorship remained persistent in his mind, and he believed that his first attempt had failed only because L'Heureux was not a priest.) The Brother appointed to take over the direction of affairs at the rue Neuve was, according to Blain, exacting and lacking in discretion – an effect presumably of a combination of inexperience and an excessive sensitivity to the weight of his responsibility. News percolated through to John Baptist of unrest in Rheims and he made arrangements for the young aspirants, the "*petits Frères*", as Blain calls them, to come to Paris to be under his own care. The "seminary" for the country schoolmasters at the rue Neuve gradually disintegrated; of the community of sixteen Brothers eight withdrew. John Baptist's hopes of replacements from the youngsters he had summoned from Rheims were dashed when, having yielded to a request from the parish priest (Baudrand, whom John Baptist felt he must oblige in this matter since he could not in the matter of the habit) that these be allowed to serve at the liturgical ceremonies in the great parish church, he saw them lose interest in the Brothers' calling and return to their homes.

A further cause for alarm was provided by certain Paris lay schoolmasters who already began to see the success of the Brothers'

work as a threat to their own careers. So aggressively hostile was their campaign that, according to the biographers, John Baptist at one point came near to withdrawing the Brothers from their two schools and returning with them to Rheims, and he would have done so had not his spiritual director (not named in this particular context) made it a matter of conscience for him to stand his ground. Other tests of his faith came in the form of the death of Brother Henri L'Heureux and of a serious illness sustained by himself during a visit back to Rheims whither he had gone to raise the declining morale of the community there. Blain sums up the situation in the following terms: *"It was a grave state of affairs in which the saintly man found himself at the end of 1690. After so many sacrifices, so many sufferings and labours, so many crosses and persecutions, and after so many appearances of success, he seemed now almost at the same point as he had been ten years previously, with few Brothers and hardly any progress in the work, but in great fear rather of seeing it all come to nothing"*.

In what Blain further calls *"this state of great perplexity"*, John Baptist (says Miguel Campos) "brought to bear all his creative inspiration to sustain the work". His response to the desperate situation (continues our guide) reveals only a renewed determination to strengthen his association with the men who remained from the depleted ranks. The threat of total disintegration at this point did not make him lose sight of what, nine years before, he had understood of God's purpose, and which had inspired his "exodus" from his home to the rue Neuve. On the contrary, the crisis served rather to intensify his resolution to bring the divine purpose to fulfilment. The difference, suggests Campos, between the 1682 "option" and the one now to be taken, was that the earlier decision had been, in the strict sense of the term, a personal one; the one he was now to make was marked by a strong communitarian dimension, a product of the intensely communitarian experience of the intervening nine years. And the act which embodied this resolution was an invitation to two of his most trusted disciples, Nicolas Vuyart and Gabriel Drolin, to join with him in making a life-long commitment, by vow, to the enterprise of the schools.

Our information about this comes from Blain alone, and the formula employed for this act of commitment is known only from the biographer's account. But the internal evidence of the text favours confidence that Blain was transcribing an original document (perhaps made available to him, attractively suggests Maurice

Hermans, by Gabriel Drolin, still alive when Blain was gathering his material for the commissioned biography. Drolin had been back in France since 1728 and, says Maurice Hermans, one can well imagine that “having found strength and encouragement in his personal copy of the document throughout the long years of his lonely mission in Rome, he would feel obliged to make known the text which, more than any other, gave witness to the heroicity of his revered Father”). Campos quotes the formula in full and a translation of it runs:

*“Most holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, prostrate with the most profound respect before your infinite and adorable Majesty, we consecrate ourselves entirely to you to procure, with all our powers and with all our endeavours, the establishment of the Society of the Christian Schools, in the manner which shall seem to us to be most pleasing to you, and most advantageous to the said Society. And for this purpose I, John Baptist de La Salle, priest, I, Nicolas Vuyart and I, Gabriel Drolin, as from now and for always, until the death of the last survivor among us, or until the establishment of the said Society is finally assured, bind ourselves by a vow of association and union to effect and maintain the said act of establishment, without power to abandon the task, even should we remain the only three members of the said Society, and should be obliged to beg for alms and live on bread only. Wherefore, we promise to carry out unanimously and by common consent all that we shall deem, in conscience and without human consideration, to be for the greater good of the said Society. Done this twenty-first day of November, Feast of the Presentation of the Most Blessed Virgin, in the year 1691.”*

Miguel Campos has a number of enlightening comments on the significance of this 1691 vow. Five years earlier, the Brothers whom John Baptist had called to an assembly at the rue Neuve had wished to pronounce a triple vow for all their lifetime, but John Baptist had thought it more prudent to limit their commitment to one of obedience, and for one year only, renewable annually thereafter. Now he took the initiative in asking two Brothers to make a lifelong vow together with him, one of heroic quality. And it was a change of view wrought by the sequence of events. It was not a matter of a heroic vow taken as a gesture betokening the first fervour of a new enterprise; rather, it was an extreme but necessary response to a desperate need – the need to maintain and strengthen an undertaking that was threatened with dissolution. The vow was not, as the earlier one had been, a vow of obedience, but one of simple association, a vow *to remain together* to ensure the existence of the

Society: for, so long as even three members remained together, the Society could be said to exist. Alone, John Baptist could not keep the Society in existence; but together with two – only two – disciples, the existence of the Society was guaranteed – at least until the death of the last survivor among them. It was a covenantal situation. John Baptist was convinced that God had given existence to the Community of the Christian Schools; if the Community – reduced, if it had to be, to the indispensable minimum of three – remained faithful to its side of the covenant, God could be trusted not to fail in his.

This 1691 vow was (in terms used by Michel Sauvage and Miguel Campos in collaboration, in their *Annoncer l'Évangile aux Pauvres*) the Founder's "forward way out of an impasse, an exercise of the theological virtue of hope, a transcendental act centred in the living God who had been with him from the beginning of the work that was God's own more than his, and who remained present to his deepest level of awareness now, in his state of 'great perplexity', giving assurance of a continued summons to creative action and a guarantee of the light and strength needed for a positive response. But this act of hope in God was expressed in a gesture which presupposed hope in men, an exercise of love implying confidence in others. Truly transcendental, it was not, nevertheless, an escape into the supernatural: the clear and sustained vision of God's role did not preclude, or even obscure, recognition of the indispensable role of men. The heroic vow of 1691 was a prophetic act, in the biblical sense of that term: the act of a seer who, aided by the Spirit, could pierce the surrounding gloom and discern the presence, the call and the will of the living God, ever at work among men to save them. And it was an efficacious act, initiating for the Founder a period of intense creativity, manifested in a lucid and eminently practical strategy for achieving what the vital formula proclaimed – the continued existence and development of an undertaking willed by the God who saves".

Blain summarises the practical measures taken at this time by John Baptist, the chief among them being the acquisition of a property at Vaugirard, on the outskirts of Paris, a house in a bad state of repair (which, no doubt, brought it within range of the financial means available to the Community), but having the advantage of a large garden and semi-rural surroundings. The Founder thought of it

first as a place of repose and recuperation for his overworked disciples; then as a haven of peace for the purpose of retreat and spiritual renewal; and, thirdly, it was there that he established a Novitiate, a gesture which not only envisaged a sound basic training for future membership of the Community, but also brought the Community a step nearer to the status of a religious congregation conforming to, but at the same time differing from, the classic pattern honoured in the Church.

Similarly orientated, perhaps, was the introduction into the community of "serving Brothers", destined to participate in the enterprise of the Christian Schools by easing the burden of the teaching Brothers and enabling them to devote all their time and energy to the work of the classroom. Giving these a brown habit, a differentiation which was not to last, was again imitative of the practice in certain established religious Orders. So confident, one might surmise, was the Founder that his little group of Brothers would not be allowed to disappear that he chose this time of 'great perplexity' to manifest his intuition that it was a religious congregation that was evolving into an enduring existence.

In this sense, the general assembly of 1694, three years later, was the culminating act of a thought-process already well-established in John Baptist's consciousness. The rules and regulations already practised for some years were now put into written form by himself, after due discussion with the Brothers to whom, Blain says, "*he gave full freedom to express their views and to tell him frankly what they would like to be included and what they thought should be left out.*" No manuscript or copy of this first formal draft of the *Règles Communes* has come down to us, but we have a good idea of what it contained because Blain says that its prescriptions were what the Brothers were observing at the time he was writing; and in the interval three successive drafts had appeared of which the texts are known to us. But the point of interest here is that this decision of the Founder, with the approval of his assembly, to give written form to a Rule seems to signify a further step in the Community's progress towards the status of a religious congregation or, as the sources now increasingly call it, a Society.

It was during this assembly also that the Brothers made known to John Baptist their wish to make perpetual vows. Such a wish had been expressed, as we have seen, at the 1686 assembly, and the Founder deemed the time too soon. Now it was men with some

eight further years of community experience who put the request to him and in persuasive terms which Blain purports to transmit as follows:

*“Are we,” they asked, “to be attached to God only as casual employees are attached to their employer? They contract for a year’s service and then either move on to another master of their choice or renew their contract for a further year. With one foot in, and the other out, of the domain they serve, they are for ever poised to stay or to quit according to what suits them best. Not one of their employers can count on their services beyond the period contracted for, since none has any claim to the personal loyalty of these mercenary-minded servants. And is not our way of serving God comparable to that of these workers, since we likewise contract for only one year, or for three at the most, at the expiration of which we find ourselves perfectly free to leave. But this recurring sense of liberty is a recurring temptation to grow lax in our service and perhaps lose ourselves altogether. If we were to make a sacrifice of that liberty, the necessity of persevering in our holy state of life would fix our wills unchangeably. And if we thus dedicated ourselves to God for all time, He in turn would attach our hearts unchangeably to Him.”*

The style is Blain’s, and there is no certain means of knowing, observes Campos, whether the quotation is only an interpretation of his or whether it comes, in substance, from the *Memoir of the Beginnings* or from the verbal or written testimonies received by the biographer from the Brothers. But whatever his source, Blain can be safely assumed to be recording validly the general dispositions of the remaining disciples at this time, and specifically their wish to structure their lives in a permanent and stable community existence. Such a wish, Blain goes on to say, was very much in accordance now with M. de La Salle’s own viewpoint. The development of his personal attitude to the nature of the Brothers’ vital commitment, from the caution of 1686 to the secret heroicity of 1691 to the acceptance now in 1694 of the principle of lifelong consecration for the community as a whole, represented a progressive response to God’s will discerned in the collective conscience of the Brothers themselves. The ratification of this response, another key moment in the history of the Institute, was reached on the feast of the Blessed Trinity 1694, when John Baptist and twelve Brothers, chosen by him, pronounced perpetual vows of obedience, association and stability in the Society. Thirteen copies of the formula then used, one for each of the participants named, are extant, all in the

handwriting of one of the twelve (Michel-Barthélemy Jacquinot) and bound into a booklet preserved in the Institute archives. Separate from this booklet's transcription of the formula used by the Founder himself, the original manuscript formula composed by him is also preserved in the archives.

The general editor of the *Cahiers Lasalliens* series, Br. Maurice Hermans, has published in Volumes 2 and 3 a detailed study of the circumstances and juridical status of these early Institute vows, and Miguel Campos is content to make use of his confrère's findings in this part of his thesis. Hermans compares the Lasallian formula with other vital formulas of the same period, as well as with formulas already well established in the tradition of canonical religious life, and shows thereby the antecedents of the triple vow of obedience, association and stability pronounced at Vaugirard in 1694. He explains that, of course, the simple and private nature of this triple vow entailed none of the juridical consequences attached to the formal profession made in the established congregations. He refers us to two "Explanations" of the obligations of this Institute vow, one found in the earliest edition of the *Collection of Short Treatises*, the other hand-written on the reverse side of the formula used by Frère Irénée when making his perpetual profession on 29 September 1717.

An examination of these two "Explanations" leads Maurice Hermans to preclude any hypothesis that the reason why the traditional vows of poverty and chastity were not mentioned in the 1694 formula was simply that they were considered to be subsumed under the vow of obedience. There were indeed precedents for such a hypothesis. The Benedictine formula of vows does not include the words "poverty" and "chastity", and this precedent was followed by subsequent monastic foundations like the Carthusians, the Canons Regular of St. Augustine, the Premonstratensians, the Dominicans and the Carmelites. Certain commentators of the Rules of these congregations have deemed the two other vows of the classic triad to be contained in the vow of obedience. One such commentator, in an article contributed to the *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, writes as follows: "The reason why these two vows, poverty and chastity, are not explicitly named in the formulas of profession is that their practice is so essential to the monastic state that they are inseparable from it, and one cannot even conceive the possibility of a religious, man or woman, not bound by the practice of continence and poverty. It is not therefore strictly necessary for these obligations to be mentioned

in the profession formula.” And the official teaching of the Dominican Order on this point, quoted in Latin by Maurice Hermans, runs thus: “In our act of profession we mention only the vow of obedience, but this embraces the observance of chastity and of voluntary poverty, as also of the precepts contained in our Rule and Constitutions and those which are imposed by the Superior.” But Hermans quotes such examples only to conclude that the reasoning they represent is ruled out, in the case of the Vaugirard vows of 1694, by the text of the “Explanation” available in the *Collection*.

The same authority likewise notes the almost total absence from the Founder’s writings of any mention of vows. There is no reference to them in the *Memoir on the Habit*, even though in that apologia he was defending the internal autonomy of a community of which at least some members had made an annual votal commitment to their work during the three years preceding the *Memoir*. The earliest known drafts of the Rules prescribed a renewal of vows for Trinity Sunday each year, and also differentiated the suffrages to be offered for the deceased Brothers according to whether they had made perpetual or temporary vows or had not made vows at all. But no specific reference was made to the nature or obligation of the vows. Even the chapter “*On the manner in which the Brothers are to behave towards the Brother Director*” conveys the impression that nothing more than the binding power of the Rule, combined with a spirit of faith, is needed to retain the Brother in a disposition of submission to his Director; there is no mention of an obligation imposed by the vow of obedience. Whenever these drafts of the Rules find it necessary to categorise the Brothers (as for example in the chapters on Travel and the use of books which contained Latin) the criteria relate to age and length of time in the Society, never to status as to vows. Only in the 1726 edition of the *Regles communes*, which followed the granting of the Bull of Approbation the previous year (i.e. six years after the death of the Founder) do chapters appear, headed, “*Of the Vows*” and “*The Obligations of the Vows*”. True, the *Collection*, from its earliest known edition (1711) had, as has been mentioned, an “*Explanation of the Vows*”; but other chapters of the same book which might well have been expected to include reference to the vows – like those on Obedience, on the subjects appropriate for conversation during recreation, and on the considerations which the Brothers were to make from time to time and especially during

the annual retreat – have none. The Meditations are without mention of the vows, with the possible exception of an indirect reference to the formula of the vows in the meditation for Trinity Sunday: “*You should pay special homage to this adorable mystery on this day, and devote yourself unreservedly to the Most Blessed Trinity, to extend its glory, as far as you are able, throughout the earth.*”

Hermans discusses the possible reasons for this surprising, but presumably deliberate, silence on the Founder’s part with regard to the vows, and concludes with a passage, most of which Miguel Campos incorporates into his own discussion at this point: “M. de La Salle’s Institute existed. It had a cohesive internal hierarchy, an efficient and supple system of government. New subjects applying for admission were attracted, it would seem, by the spirit of abnegation they witnessed in the humble and generous men who were already members. Once accepted into the community, the newcomers were hardly distinguishable, in mere terms of rank, from their elders: the Rules sufficed to establish a bond of fraternity. Without formal conditions, the new members simply became ‘Brothers’, not merely by virtue of the title they assumed, but because, in a shared discipleship of M. de La Salle, they received the same doctrine, undertook similar services, and accepted comparable duties. Several of them would bind themselves more fully, making vows of association, stability and obedience for a limited period or for life; and by thus supplementing their existing obligations, these ‘professed members’ served to buttress the solidarity of the group. But a votal engagement did not seem to be *essential* to the structure of the Community. It was not – as it was in the monastic orders and congregations – an obligatory principle of incorporation and subjection, forming the basis of all the duties and rights, if not of all the privileges, of the religious. The Brother was what he was independently of his vows: he belonged to the Community before promising association and stability therein; the Rules which he accepted on entry prescribed nothing further in the way of obligation. So, in writings which were intended for *all* his disciples, John Baptist understandably avoided allusion to the vows.”

The insight contained in these words of Br. Maurice Hermans contributes to our understanding of the religious significance of the perpetual vows pronounced by the nucleus of the Community in 1694. The vows were not *needed*, as such, to give cohesion and solidarity to M. de La Salle’s enterprise. The sense of fraternal union

with one another under the totally accepted leadership of one whose vision they trusted because it had led him to become one with them, this had already given the Community a true corporate existence. The introduction of perpetual vows, however, was a development which could no longer be deferred, because it manifested, now insistently, a corporate consciousness of belonging to a Society for a specific purpose in the divine plan. The verbal expression of the sense of urgency underlying this consciousness, which we have quoted from Blain, was not now to be gainsaid. It was a desire to ratify their conviction that welled up from within the Community's conscience. The perpetual vows were not to be imposed as a binding influence to keep the Community together; nor were they a structure aimed at expediting the eventual recognition of a new religious congregation in the Church. The desire expressed by the Community told John Baptist that they had recognised a stage in their spiritual itinerary which corresponded with his own urgent recognition three years earlier, when he had made a lifelong commitment with Vuyart and Drolin (though this vow had been taken without knowledge of the rest of the Community).

The importance, indispensability even, of M. de La Salle's incorporation with them as a factor in the Community's existence is dramatically demonstrated at this moment by the failure of a renewed effort on his part to have himself replaced as Superior. Blain well conveys John Baptist's motives in pursuing this objective despite the reversal he had accepted eight years before when he had been briefly replaced by Henri L'Heureux. The biographer attributes to the Founder a lengthy discourse delivered to the assembly the day following the ceremony of perpetual profession, and Campos quotes a portion of it "because of its rich thematic content":

*"M. de La Salle said that since Providence had bound them together with perpetual vows, it would be wise now to seek the means of rendering their union so solid and strong that neither the world nor the devil would be able to shake it; that the first such means was to place their confidence in God alone, remembering that those who depend for support on man lean on a fragile reed. . . He added that the second effective means was to have as their superior one like themselves, not a priest, saying that so long as the sacerdotal status differentiated their leader from themselves, the union of the community would remain insecure . . . It was time, in fact, and urgently so, for them to take from himself the government of the*

*Brothers, for if they continued to delay in doing so they would have reason to regret it. He assured them that if they failed to take his advice on this matter, they would have the sad experience of discovering, when death removed him from them, that they had as many different superiors as they had schools; that this multiplicity of pastors would surely divide the flock and that the scattered sheep would drift out of touch with one another . . . and, having no longer a uniform guidance, they would cease to have a common spirit, a single heart, a united outlook. The dispersed groups would no longer constitute a single society; differences of attitude, of doctrine, of custom and even of garb, would emerge, and ruin would result from such divisions. For, thus separated, the Brothers would be replaceable only by people of a different kind of talent, outlook and purpose, so that soon their schools would come under the direction of salaried schoolmasters and would lose the principle of gratuity and, with it, their Christian inspiration and their true value for the education of the young . . .”*

The wordy style, again, is Blain’s, but he is no doubt faithfully reporting the general line of the Founder’s argument. The evidence for this is, in fact, that the biographer’s own interpretation of John Baptist’s reason for wishing to resign is at variance with the motivation revealed in the passage quoted. For Blain, once again, it was his saint-hero’s humility that was the key factor in this persistent effort of the Founder to have himself replaced as Superior. The words with which the biographer introduces this renewed attempt by John Baptist translate thus:

*“This assembly of twelve Brothers, united and established in their vocation by vow, appeared once more to present the humble founder with a favourable opportunity to descend from the first place in the Community. His humility, ever unhappy with that position, had never relinquished the intention to have one of the Brothers replace him. He had already gladly taken the opportunity of a similar assembly to achieve this purpose and had so well presented his case that he had succeeded to the full satisfaction of the holy passion of humility which animated him.”*

But such an interpretation misrepresents (to the point of caricature, says Campos) the motivation of the Founder. Of course the wish to relinquish the leadership was the wish of a humble man, and was movingly consistent with the sustained pursuit of total oneness with his disciples that had become a lodestar of John Baptist’s spiritual itinerary. But, more significantly, it constituted a positive, deliberate move towards the lasting stabilisation of the

Society, which was his God-given task. The speech attributed by Blain to the Founder and quoted above carries the stamp of authenticity in its reasoning, if not in its style, precisely because it reveals this practical aspect of John Baptist's purpose.

And the response of the disciples on this occasion is revealing also of the distance *they* had travelled in their understanding of God's purpose in their lives. Eight years before, they had yielded to John Baptist's wish to resign and had elected Henri L'Heureux in his place. They had done so reluctantly but out of deference to the will of the man whose guidance they felt at that stage to be their only sure pointer to God's will. On this second occasion they declined his wish from a corporate conviction that the moment was inopportune for acceding to it. Blain's account of the Founder's efforts to bring them to his way of thinking on this matter well suggests the atmosphere of tension that developed. But John Baptist's failure to have himself replaced as Superior (successive ballots, despite vehement dissuasions and reproaches on his part, having unanimously confirmed him in that position) was, in fact, a victory for the ultimate purpose that motivated his wish. The community was already taking its destiny into its own hands by thus imposing its will on that of the revered leader. It demonstrated thus early what was entailed by the vow of obedience "to the body of the Society" which he had led them in pronouncing the day before.

But although his sense of disappointment was profound, his argument had not been in vain. The minute which recorded this quite dramatic exchange in the 1694 assembly admirably conveys the facts and the implications, and is worth quoting (the original document, in the handwriting of Michel-Barthélemy Jacquinot, is preserved in the Rome archives):

*"We, the undersigned Brothers, Nicolas Vuyart, Gabriel Drolin, Jean Parois, Gabriel-Charles Rasigade, Jean Henry, Jacques Compain, Jean Jacquot, Jean Louis de Marcheville, Michel Barthélemy Jacquinot, Edme Leguillon, Gilles Pierre and Claude Roussel, having, by vows pronounced yesterday, associated ourselves with M. Jean-Baptiste de La Salle, priest, to conduct free schools, together and by association, record that, in consequence of our vows and of the association we have contracted by them, we have chosen M. Jean-Baptiste de La Salle as our Superior; and we promise to obey him with entire submission in virtue of our vows, as also to obey those who will be appointed by him to direct us. We further declare our intention that our present choice of the said M. de La Salle is*

*not to be taken as a precedent for future elections, our resolve being that henceforth and for all time no priest or person in sacred orders is to be accepted into our Society or elected as Superior, and that we shall never admit as Superior anyone who has not associated himself with us by the same vow as we have pronounced, and as will be pronounced by future members of the Society. Done at Vaugirard, this seventh day of June in the year 1694.”*

This document confirms (says Miguel Campos) that if M. de La Salle accepted afresh the superiorship he had tried to shed, it was because he recognised in the insistence of the Brothers a specific summons to continue the task of consolidating the enterprise of the Christian Schools. On the other hand, it shows that by determination of the same Brothers, the Society (the term they now use) was henceforth to have a purely lay character. Continuity was thus established between the self-awareness of community identity revealed in the *Memoir on the Habit* and the further development recorded in this election minute. The essence of the matter was that the Brothers were now sure that they constituted an autonomous body – a Society – and that in the exercise of that autonomy they had chosen to renew their obedience to John Baptist de La Salle, having, with full deliberation, appointed him to be their Superior, the one and only priest that would ever fill that role.

## II

### *The Formula of Vows as a ‘Parole-Force’*

The development described in the previous chapter – the *événement-clef* in Campos terminology – may be briefly, if less than adequately, summarised as the crystallization of the Brothers’ awareness that their personal destiny was bound up with that of John Baptist de La Salle in constituting a Society willed by God as part of the divine plan of salvation. The 1694 perpetual vows were the culminating expression of that awareness and it is the formulation of that consecration which Miguel Campos has chosen as the relevant *parole-force*. The present chapter will try to convey some of the rich insights that are contained in his commentary on this noble text, composed (we are expressly told by Blain) by the Founder himself. For the purpose of his discussion Campos links the formula pronounced by John Baptist together with Nicolas Vuyart and Gabriel Drolin in 1691 (already quoted on p.106) with that of 1694, and indeed sets out the two side by side on the page. He believes that a comparative study of the two texts will shed light on the way the mind of the founder worked from one course of action to another, and on how the measure of 1691 developed into that of 1694, the religious experience revealed therein being sustained and controlled throughout by the dominant purpose of conducting free Christian schools for the poor. If, following Campos, we place the two formulas in parallel columns the subsequent comments will be more clear:

1691

*Most holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, prostrate with the most profound respect before your infinite and adorable Majesty, we consecrate ourselves entirely to you to procure, with all our powers and with all our endeavours, the establishment of the Society of the Christian Schools, in the*

1694

*Most Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, prostrate with the most profound respect before your infinite and adorable Majesty, I consecrate myself entirely to you to procure your glory as far as I am able and as you will require of me.*

*manner which shall seem to us to be most pleasing to you, and most advantageous to the said Society.*

*And for this purpose, I John Baptist de La Salle, priest, I, Nicolas Vuyart and I, Gabriel Drolin, as from now and for always, until the death of the last survivor among us, or until the establishment of the said Society is finally assured, bind ourselves by a vow of association and union to effect and maintain the said act of establishment, without power to abandon the task, even should we remain the only three members of the said Society, and should be obliged to beg for alms and live on bread only.*

*Wherefore, we promise to carry out unanimously and by common consent all that we shall deem, in conscience and without human consideration, to be for the greater good of the said Society.*

*Done this twenty-first day of November, feast of the Presentation of the Most Blessed Virgin, in the year 1691.*

*And for this purpose I, John Baptist de La Salle, priest, promise and vow to unite myself and live in Society with Brothers Nicolas Vuyart, Gabriel Drolin, Jean Partois . . . etc., to keep together and by association gratuitous schools, wherever I may be, even if I were obliged to beg for alms and live on bread only; or to do anything in the said Society at which I shall be employed, whether by the body of the Society or by the superiors who will have the government thereof.*

*Wherefore, I promise and vow obedience to the body of the Society as well as to the superiors; which vows of association as well as of stability in the said Society, and of obedience, I promise to keep inviolably all my lifetime. In testimony whereof I have signed.*

*Done at Vaugirard, this sixth day of June, feast of the Most Holy Trinity, in the year 1694.*

The first thing to be noted from this comparison (observes Campos) is that the structure is the same in both formulas, each having a parallel division of three paragraphs, the first expressing the act of consecration, the second the means to be taken to ratify the consecration, and the third indicating the practical implications. To be noted is the use of the same introductory phrases in both formulas: “*Most Holy Trinity*”, “*And for this purpose . . .*” and “*Wherefore . . .*” This recognition of the structural similarity enables the differences between the formulas to be seen in sharper relief, and these differences, in turn, suggest the way in which experience has deepened between the two vital acts.

In the first formula the consecration to the Trinity has for objective “*to procure . . . the establishment of the Society of the Christian Schools*”; that is to say, the strengthening of the cohesion and continuity of the work, in a manner contributing to the good of the Society (meaning the Society’s potential for effective apostolic action) – though only by means which will be deemed to be most pleasing to the Trinity. In other words, the enterprise of the Christian Schools is not to be dependent on the means taken by men, but on the good pleasure of God who guarantees the “establishment” of the work in response to the resolve of John Baptist and his two disciples to act in a manner pleasing to the Trinity. The second formula substitutes the logical conclusion of this reasoning for the implied reasoning itself: “*to procure . . . the establishment of the Society of the Christian Schools*” has become “*to procure your glory*”. The inference is that for John Baptist, the glory of God is to be achieved by the firm establishment of the Society: the Founder is emboldened to believe that the humble work to be accomplished by his disciples in schools for the poor is equated, in the designs of Providence, with the glorification of the Trinity.

But the term “the glory of God” belongs to the realm of mystery, as does any term relating to the divine Being, and hence the establishing of the Society of the Christian Schools was a way of interpreting the mystery of the Trinity to men. The Brother, by his consecration of himself to the Blessed Trinity for the work of the schools was assuming the role of mediator of the divine mystery. An alliance was thus formed, transcendental because it involved the participation of God himself, but binding for the human partner in terms fulfillable in the here and now of intramundane existence. The phrase of the first formula “*in the manner which shall seem to us to be*

*most pleasing to you*” becoming, in the second, “*as far as I am able and as you will require of me*”, preserves this terrestrial dimension in a contract which might otherwise remain a generous but inconclusive venture into mere mysticism.

According to the second paragraph of the first formula the object of the vow is association and union for the purpose of effecting and maintaining the firm establishment of the Society. A phrase of the corresponding paragraph of the 1694 formula might seem to suggest an inversion of the twofold commitment, and that the emphasis in 1694 is on unity within an association now assured. But the second formula itself precludes the idea that the Founder intended such an inversion since, in the third paragraph, he speaks of the same vows (“*lesquels voeux*”) as “*association*” and “*stability*”, placing the concept of association first, as in 1691. However, he now uses “*stability*” to correspond to the previous phrase “*live in Society with*” (“*demeurer en Société avec*”) and we are reminded thereby that the French word “*demeurer*” (deriving from the Latin “*dimorari*”) connotes something more than simply “*live*”; it means rather “*continue to live*”, “*remain*”. Indeed, by introducing the term “*stability*” the Founder seems to express a confidence that the Society will now endure. The corporate and spontaneous wish of the Brothers to bind themselves by perpetual vows has revealed to him that the purpose of the 1691 vow – to ensure the establishment of the Society – has been sufficiently fulfilled for the object of its establishment to receive due recognition in the act of consecration. And it was this object, the conducting of free schools for the poor – not the establishing of a Society *per se* – which would procure God’s glory.

The mention of authorities in the second paragraph of the 1694 formula – “*the body of the Society*” and “*the superiors who will have the government thereof*” corroborates this concept. Only an established Society, not a Society in the making, can claim structures of government such as these words imply. The three who made the 1691 vow promised to carry out whatever would be necessary for their purpose “*unanimously and by common consent*”, it being understood that each would be motivated by what, in the depths of his conscience, he believed to be “*for the greater good of the Society*”. No doubt, the concept of unanimity and common consent presupposes a disposition to obey, and specifically the idea of obedience “*to the body of the Society*” is germinally present in 1691. But the thirteen who made their act of consecration three years later

introduced a juridical element by promising and vowing “obedience” – “*no do anything in the said Society at which I shall be employed*” – not from a motive of consensus, however religiously inspired, but by submission to others, even to others still in the future, who would have the right, in consequence of this vow, to engage their obedience.

Significantly, the advance from the status of a Society evolving to that of a Society existing, does not preclude the reappearance in the second formula of the “heroic” clause of the first: “. . . *even if I were obliged to beg for alms and live on bread only*”. The dimension of evangelical detachment, expressive of total trust in Providence, on whom alone the enterprise was founded, remained integral to the fulfilment of the mission. If the establishing of the Society was worth such self-sacrifice, the fulfilment of the object for which the Society was established, the conducting of schools for the poor, was no less worth it. The recognition that this terrestrial mission was an undertaking to procure God’s glory, and therefore to be fulfilled at whatever cost to self, could hardly, says Campos, be expressed in more radical terms.

There is much more to Miguel Campos’s discussion of the significance to be perceived from a comparison of these two formulas, each an eloquent testimony to the mind of John Baptist de La Salle at two related stages of his spiritual journey. But perhaps sufficient has been said to indicate his line of thought. To conclude, however, it will be appropriate to quote a passage from a chapter of *Annoncer l’Evangile aux Pauvres*, a chapter in which Miguel Campos and Michel Sauvage in collaboration reflect on the religious significance of the 1694 votal formula. Their words, written for a wider public than the former’s academic thesis, will convey very well the reason why Campos ranks this document as a precious *parole-force* for our understanding of a particular stage in the Founder’s faith-journey:

“The twelve men who, with the Founder, pronounced the vows of 1694 associated themselves in brotherhood because they had each experienced the presence of God in their personal history. The consecration of each was to a transcendental God, even if it could be fulfilled only by community with men. Likewise it was with the specific object of contributing to the salvation of the children who would be entrusted to his care that each Brother pledged himself, in association with others, to conduct free

schools. What further united these men in a bond of brotherhood was each one's identical experience of the need of salvation for the poor and of a personal responsibility to meet that need. The apostolic zeal of each individual Brother reached out to poor and neglected children, but that zeal could find outlet only through community.

“The vow ‘to live in society . . . together and by association . . .’ which ratified an antecedent experience, both human and religious, reinforced the reality of that experience. In the very act of commitment by vow all that had gone before was summed up and, in a sense, accomplished. The undertaking of M. de La Salle, first with Drolin and Vuyart in 1691, and then with them and ten other companions in 1694, was more than an endorsement of the past: it ratified in a decisive manner a project previously tested in a real-life situation. In making their affirmation these men were raising an edifice; they gave voice to a purpose and by the very fact a Society came into existence.”

## *A Charism at Work Against the Odds*

At the point we have reached in his thesis, Miguel Campos reminds his readers that his purpose is not to present a biography of John Baptist de La Salle but to attempt to discover in what way the Saint himself understood his religious experience. So far he has shown that the recognition by John Baptist of a personal vocation coincided with the first efforts to ensure success, in an apostolic sense, of the enterprise of the free schools, triggered by Adrien Nyel's arrival in Rheims. If M. de La Salle gave himself totally and, in the event, irrevocably to this work in 1682 it was because he had reached a certainty in his mind that the enterprise was "God's work", fulfilling an ecclesial function destined to contribute to the building of God's kingdom. Simultaneously with, and inseparably from, this process of adhering to a personal summons, John Baptist had recognised as indispensable that, in order to be an ecclesial enterprise, the schools should be conducted, not by salaried teachers primarily concerned about making a living, but by schoolmasters called to the work by God and transformed by that call into ministers of the Gospel. The gradual maturing of the community of schoolmasters towards their own awareness of their elevated vocation was the fruit of M. de La Salle's sustained formative procedures which culminated in the definitive commitment by vow in 1694.

Campos quotes at this point a document dating from 1721 (two years, therefore, after the Founder's death), a memorandum apparently addressed by the community of Rouen to their civil authorities by way of explaining the origin and purpose of their Institute. It runs, in translation:

*"This Institute was founded in 1680 by Monsieur de La Salle, Canon of Rheims, who was moved with great compassion for the many children of the poor and of the labouring classes, children whose upbringing was neglected because their parents, who were without education themselves and, in any case, were obliged to spend each day earning a living, were unable to instruct them in the principles of religion. He conceived the idea of founding schools where the children of these poor and working-class*

*families could, without payment of fees, learn reading, writing and arithmetic, and receive a Christian education by means of catechetical and other daily instructions suited to the forming of good Christians. For this purpose, he brought together certain unmarried young men who showed themselves most willing to become teachers and also to lead a spiritual life, but had previously found no opportunity to do either. The said M. de La Salle, finding that the number of such helpers steadily increased, and that their services began to be called for in several towns of the kingdom, applied himself to the task of enabling them to live in a manner appropriate to the purpose of their Institute. And in order to renew in them the life of the early Christians and to inspire them to put their possessions at the disposal of all, and so own nothing as personal to themselves, he drew up rules for them relating both to the general administration of their Institute and to the daily exercises to be practised in it.”*

Miguel Campos singles out for comment from this memorandum the juxtaposition of the phrases “*enabling them to live in a manner appropriate to the purpose of their Institute.*” and “*to renew in them the life of the early Christians*”. In the understanding of the Rouen community, writing so soon after their Founder’s death which had taken place in their midst, the efforts of M. de La Salle to integrate “*unmarried young men*” into a community had been inseparable from his growing awareness of a mission to establish free schools for the poor. As the Rouen community saw it, “to live in a manner appropriate to the purpose of their Institute” was to live as a truly Christian community; they were quite clear that there was no opposition between their community life and their apostolic mission – between community and school. On the contrary, the two were indissociable. The rules which, as the Rouen memorandum pointed out, M. de La Salle drew up for his young men, by way of renewing in them the life of the Christians portrayed in the Acts of the Apostles, precisely underlined this integration of community and school. The opening words of the (earliest known) 1705 draft of those rules ran: “*The Intitutæ of the Brothers of the Christian Schools is a society in which profession is made of conducting schools gratuitously.*” The point could hardly be put more forcibly that the very *raison d’être* of the Society of Brothers was to conduct free schools; it is the same point, incidentally, as the Founder had made in the *Memoir on the Habit* when he wrote “*The members of this community are occupied in teaching in gratuitous schools . . .*” and also in the formula of vows where the

act of consecration to the Trinity had for its objective the procuring of God's glory by the conducting of free schools.

John Baptist's recognition of his personal vocation and his unswerving acceptance of its implications have, in fact, involved at every stage thus far his adherence to the project of founding free schools for the poor. The *événement-clef* now to be considered is specifically the combination of measures adopted by the Founder to ensure the success of the work of the schools – "*pour que l'école aille bien*", to use a simple but expressive phrase used by the Founder himself. And our guide conducts his investigation under two headings, namely, "The Consolidation of the community" and "The Extension of the Work of the Schools"; but, though separately studied, these two developments are not to be seen as independent of each other. On the contrary, they are interconnected at every stage, logically because the Society existed for the enterprise of free education, existentially because the historical facts show the interaction taking place.

Reference has been made to the critical situation in which the Community found itself by the end of 1690 and to the practical measures adopted by M. de La Salle to meet the crisis. One such measure, we saw, was the acquisition of a large house at Vaugirard, in a semi-rural suburb of Paris, for the purpose, among others, of establishing a novitiate. As things turned out, both the parish priest of Saint-Sulpice and the parish priest of Vaugirard itself found reason for dissatisfaction with this development. Henri Baudrand, at Saint-Sulpice, had withheld his approval for a protracted period, seemingly resentful that another parish should prospectively share a benefit of which he thought he had a monopoly; the curé of Vaugirard, friendly and welcoming at first, took umbrage when John Baptist obtained permission from the Archbishop, Louis Antoine de Noailles, to establish a domestic chapel at the Vaugirard community house. Baudrand's displeasure, according to Blain, led to the withholding of the agreed salary for the work done by the Brothers in the rue du Bac school, and this deprivation aggravated the hardships of the struggling communities, already severe owing to the particularly bad winter of 1693-94. (Battersby questions Blain's attribution of this cessation of payment to Baudrand's annoyance over the Founder's insistence on starting a novitiate at Vaugirard, and suggests that the real motive was simply a lack of means caused by the increased calls on the parish priest's charity during the severe

winter. But Campos seems to accept Blain's interpretation.)

As for John Baptist, however, the austerities thus imposed by circumstances, though not sought or welcomed by him as a good in themselves, were not seen by him as a threat to the consolidation of the young Society. They served, on the contrary, to intensify the fervour of those whose motives for remaining members were single-minded, and they provided a test for the others either to purify their motives or to withdraw. The net effect was that evangelical values prevailed among these early Lasallians, not (Campos observes) because of a predetermined arrangement inspired by the gospel pages, but because of the very down to earth circumstances imposed by the train of events. John Baptist himself, of course, saw these events with the eyes of faith and as expressing the purpose of Providence. He saw in the hardships he and his disciples were called upon to endure (and they are described in chilling detail by Blain) a sign of God's endorsement of what had so far been accomplished; for he knew that a religious congregation cannot come into existence without going through the crucible of evangelical purification.

In 1695 M. Baudrand resigned his position as curé of Saint-Sulpice and was succeeded, early in the following year, by the 60-year-old Joachim Trotti de La Chétardye. The new parish priest had no personal knowledge of M. de La Salle, having spent the previous thirty years, first as a seminary professor at Le Puy and then as rector of the seminary at Bourges. But he came to the large parish of Saint-Sulpice full of zeal for the salvation of souls, and his cordial reaction to the work being accomplished there by the Brothers was immediate and self-evidently sincere. Unfortunately the generous patronage he forthwith showed for the Community, the paternal interest he took in each of the Brothers individually, and the influential benevolence he won for the Lasallians from the important personages he came to know in the capital, all amounted to an exercise of that kind of charity which, unconsciously or otherwise on the part of the benefactor, establishes proprietorial claims, and M. de La Chétardye was to become for the Founder one of those friends who render enemies superfluous. Georges Rigault has provided a fine psychological sketch of this formidable character in the first volume of his *Histoire Générale* of the Institute, and a translation of a couple of his paragraphs here will be helpful for a better understanding of

Campos's discussion of the events consequent on Chétardye's arrival at Saint-Sulpice:

"We may safely assume that M. de La Chétardye did not recognise the workings of his own subconscious. He was innocent, in his own mind, of secret manoeuvrings, blind anger, ignoble intentions. When Blain refers to him anonymously, but explicitly enough, as 'the enemy of the servant of God', the impression given is of a lurking, shadowy figure, full of quasi-apocalyptic menace. And by thus cloaking his identity in mystery, out of respect for his reputation, the biographer only succeeds in damaging the memory of a virtuous and venerable parish priest. It would have served his purpose better to record the simple fact that when M. de La Chétardye decided to dispense with the personal services of M. de La Salle, he believed he had no other motive than the good of his parish and the interests, not indeed of the Institute as a whole, but of those Brothers who were working in the Saint-Sulpice schools. He had the same concept of his role as his predecessors, MM. de La Barmondière and Baudrand, but to an even greater degree. Like a French gardener he thought it his business to prune and trim a tree that was growing out of line and appearing too high above the enclosing wall.

"Once separated from their Rheims founder the schoolmasters at work in the Saint-Sulpice schools would form a parochial religious community. A clergyman, appointed by the Archbishop on the recommendation of the parish priest, would act as their Superior. A suitable daily programme, less demanding than the one followed at Rheims and at Vaugirard, would enable them to devote themselves to their work without excessive fatigue and premature illness. New members would be recruited within the parish and the community would be maintained by the clergy or by gifts and legacies of parishioners. When the time came to retire from teaching they would be supported, in old age or in illness, by the charity of those who had benefited from their services. Their only link with the Brothers teaching elsewhere would be a common vocation and the use mainly of the same pedagogical methods, though their relationship with their former colleagues would remain appropriately fraternal."

A significant development which occurred a couple of years after the appointment of La Chétardye was the transfer of the novitiate from Vaugirard back to within the parish boundaries of Saint-Sulpice, at

the large enclosed property known as the Grand'maison. The biographers, Maillefer and Blain, (Bernard's narrative, or the part of it that has survived, ends just before the move to Paris) are at variance in their explanations of this return of the novitiate from Vaugirard. Blain seems to place the initiative for the transfer with John Baptist. The accommodation at Vaugirard having become inadequate for the number of applicants for admission, and its distance from Paris having caused various difficulties to arise, the Founder "*decided to look for a more spacious and convenient property nearer to Paris*". The vacant Grand'maison seemed ideal for the purpose and (continues Blain) finding the stipulated rent of 1600 livres quite beyond his means, the Founder sought and obtained the financial assistance of the new parish priest. Maillefer's version is that La Chétardye himself suggested the transfer, in order to have the advantage of the edifying life of the novices for his own parish. John Baptist "*had recourse to prayer*" to discover whether the move would be in conformity with God's will and, because the situation at Vaugirard was becoming untenable, he yielded to the curé's promptings, the latter assuming full responsibility for the expenses involved. As Maillefer expresses it in a brief sentence which may have been intended to convey La Chétardye's unhesitating readiness to oblige, but which, in the light of subsequent developments, sounds ominously like the closing of a trap: "*M. le Curé prit tout sur lui*".

Whatever the correct version, John Baptist's Paris communities were once again entirely within the Saint-Sulpice confines and, according to Rigault, this development catalysed the sequence of difficulties which made up the Founder's association with the French capital. But it was the practicalities of an unlooked-for dilemma which had led him to believe that the transfer of the novitiate was what God willed for him at that moment. The austere conditions at Vaugirard had had the paradoxical effect of attracting more would-be recruits to the Society than the accommodation could cope with; and John Baptist was unwilling to refuse anyone admission, preferring to leave the sorting-out of the genuine vocations ("*the separating of the wheat from the chaff*" in Blain's phrase) to the testing routine of the novitiate itself. Whatever the Founder's personal conviction about keeping open the lines of independence and autonomy, he clearly saw as providential the availability of the Grand'maison and the curé's offer of means for renting it, at a

moment when a fitting novitiate training was no longer viable at Vaugirard, and he acted accordingly.

The transfer took place on 18th April 1698, and the new establishment was placed under the patronage of St. Cassian. The novices numbered thirty-five and the Founder appointed as their Director, Brother John Henry, a saintly man whose tenure was sadly terminated by his premature death a year later. Other appointments made by the Founder at this time included a director of studies and inspector of schools in the person of the twenty-six year old Jean Jacquot. As general bursar for the Society he appointed Charles Frappet, known as Brother Thomas, described as a man of good sense, conscientious, methodical, diligent and devoted. At the age of twenty-eight he had the full confidence of M. de La Salle, and he appears also to have won the esteem of M. de La Chétardye who would, it seems (from certain implications made by Blain), have thought of him as a possible figure-head superior of a Saint-Sulpice branch of the Society; but Thomas remained loyal to John Baptist throughout. A general secretary was appointed in the person of Brother Antoine (Jean Parfois); and the Founder's ever-present anxiety about the Brothers' health led him also to choose as general infirmarian a Brother Jean Chrysostome who was to die a few years later, in 1705, at Chartres, tending the Brothers laid low by an outbreak of purple fever there.

The Brothers were now conducting four schools within the parish of Saint-Sulpice – at the rue Princesse, the rue du Bac, the rue Saint-Placide and the rue de Vaugirard. The total number of pupils, according to Simon de Doncourt, historian of the parish of Saint-Sulpice, was about a thousand. It was at this time also that the Founder accepted the request of M. de La Chétardye (acting on behalf of the Archbishop of Paris who himself had been asked by King Louis to intervene) that he assume responsibility for housing and educating at the Grand'maison some fifty Irish boys, fellow-exiles of James II.

The administration of the Society was becoming complex and the constantly growing need to delegate responsibility put pressures on John Baptist which resulted in his making two unfortunate appointments. The early death of the Director of Novices, Jean Henry, left an unexpected and crucially important vacancy, and the chosen successor, Brother Michel Lequeasse, a model of regularity and self-denial, created problems for the Founder by the harshness of

his treatment of the young people in his care. Another man of similar character, Brother Ponce Theseux, hard on himself but, as it turned out, hard on others also, was made Director of the rue Princesse community. These two appointments were to provoke a series of misfortunes which were to harass John Baptist for years. The indiscretions of the two men were deemed the responsibility of the one who had appointed them and his status as Superior was called into question.

In fact, John Baptist had no juridical claims to superiority at all. He had indeed brought the Brothers together as a Society and had been nominated by themselves as their head, but in ecclesiastical and canonical terms he had no rights. As charity schoolmasters, working in parish schools, the Brothers came under the authority of the parish priest and were accountable to him for what they did in the schools. But, as Miguel Campos observes, such considerations hardly entered into John Baptist's thinking at this time. For him, everything was in the hands of Providence and he simply continued to follow wherever he believed Providence was leading him, responding to requests for Brothers which were now reaching him from Bishops and other authorities, training his men personally and through others, following closely the spiritual and professional progress of each. He concerned himself little about the possibility of hostile reactions until one such was upon him. Complaints about the harshness of Michel and Ponce were brought to the notice of La Chétardye and even to that of the Archbishop. The painful sequel, culminating in the attempt to impose the Abbé Bricot as Superior, is dramatically chronicled by both Maillefer and Blain.

The biographers once again focus attention on the humility and submissiveness shown by the Founder in these trying circumstances. But Miguel Campos suggests that there was nothing merely passive in his response to these events. He accepted responsibility for the misdemeanours of his disciples which had precipitated the hostile moves, but in doing so he was motivated principally by the need to save the Society from dissolution. The Cardinal Archbishop had become involved in the affair, and had appointed a Superior to take the place to which John Baptist had canonically no right. When his Vicar General reported back what had happened at the attempted induction of the appointee – concluding his account with the memorable testimony: *“If all religious were as affectionately attached to their superiors as these Brothers are to M. de La Salle, the communities of*

*Paris would be only a source of consolation.*” – the Cardinal realised that he had been led by false reports into over-hasty action. But even he could not now cancel the arrangement without seeming to have had his authority successfully repudiated by a community of lay schoolmasters; and that, as John Baptist well understood, must have disastrous consequences for the Society.

According to Blain, a member of the Sulpician community, M. Madot, devised the compromise solution which, in effect, was to leave the Abbé Bricot with the title of Superior and M. de La Salle with the real authority. It was an unsatisfactory solution but the only way out of an impasse which else spelt ruin for the enterprise of the schools. It was a solution also which required both the acquiescence of the Founder in a humiliating arrangement and the acceptance, however reluctant, on the part of the Brothers who had shown, throughout the episode, a striking corporate loyalty to their leader and, more significantly, a shrewd discernment of the motives at work and the implications for themselves as a Society. But the influence which won their acceptance was that of John Baptist whose personal humility was indeed equal to the test, but whose overriding consideration was the survival of an undertaking which he was convinced was “God’s work” – not to be destroyed by human machinations from whatever source.

The whole unhappy situation had evolved not so much from the accusations of harshness levelled at the two Brothers as from the fact that these had provided an opportunity for M. de La Chétardye to try to dispense with the Founder. What was really involved was a confrontation between two opposed concepts of government for the Society of the Christian Schools. As Maurice Hermans has expressed it in his doctoral thesis published as No. 11 in the *Cahiers Lasalliens* series, “M. de La Salle had wished this form of government to be hierarchic and centralised. M. de La Chétardye, curé of Saint-Sulpice, wanted to have in his own hands not only the overall direction of the parish schools but also the internal government of the Paris community.” Hermans quotes in support of this view the testimony of Charles de La Grange whose letter, written at the time of the events to the parish priest of Laon, is our first-hand source of information about the affair. “*As far as I can gather,*” wrote La Grange, “*M. de La Salle’s great crime seems to have been that he has not acted according to the views of the curé of Saint-Sulpice. The latter would like to have a say in the private concerns of the community of Brothers and this*

*M. de La Salle has refused him . . . This is the principal source of the trouble, and if an understanding were to be reached with the curé it would be easy to settle with the Archbishop.”*

But John Baptist believed that no understanding with M. de La Chétardye was possible which would not divert the Society from the path laid out for it by Providence, and so he was not prepared to seek such a way out of the impasse even to “settle with the Archbishop”. Cardinal de Noailles, in fact, seems to have been less than totally convinced of any culpability on the part of M. de La Salle and when the latter, in a gesture to dissociate himself from the seemingly disobedient stance of the Brothers, wished to surrender his diocesan faculties for hearing confessions, the Archbishop declined to accept. Miguel Campos notes also that by the year 1703 de Noailles must have formally recognised John Baptist’s status as Superior of the Brothers, since the Institute archives possesses a legal document of that year concerning the foundation of the school at Troyes and signed by M. de La Salle in the capacity of Superior.

But the tensions between him and the parish priest of Saint-Sulpice persisted, and these led in the first place to John Baptist’s decision to withdraw his novices from the Grand’maison and to repair with them and their community to a less satisfactory domicile in the faubourg Saint-Antoine and situated in the parish of Saint-Paul. But the schools in the Saint-Sulpice parish continued to function, with their staffs remaining to form the base-community at the rue Princesse – all being now maintained entirely by M. de La Chétardye. John Baptist did not lose touch with the rue Princesse, visiting the Brothers from time to time and sometimes prolonging his stay. But the parish priest did nothing to make him welcome and the Founder had increasing cause to feel that his role had become redundant as far as the parish of Saint-Sulpice was concerned. But it was a redundancy which he refused to admit, not because his personal rights were at stake, but because to concede the implied claims of the curé of Saint-Sulpice would have been a betrayal of the trust which Providence had placed in him for the future of a work of salvation. So sure was he that that future was bound up with the autonomy of the Society, with the internal government centralised in the hands of the Brothers themselves, that he had tried twice (as we have seen) to shed his role of Superior in favour of one of them. It was the principle which had inspired his refusal of the offer of the Archbishop of Rheims to confer diocesan status,

financial security and the immensely influential patronage which he, the brother of Louis XIV's chancellor, the Marquis de Louvois, could offer. It was the same concept which had made him persist in establishing a novitiate at Vaugirard despite the pressures of M. Baudrand to keep the Brothers within the confines of his own parish. Significantly, the troubles he had now run into with Baudrand's successor seemed to stem from the element of compromise which had led him to bring the novices back into the Saint-Sulpice parish. Whether or not John Baptist now read this apparent compromise as an error to be regretted, he was firm in his intention that La Chétardye should not split the Society and cultivate a branch membership for his parish – thereby, additionally, setting a model for parish priests elsewhere to copy.

Although the attempt to displace John Baptist was doubtless the most serious threat yet encountered to the Institute's survival, it was only one among a whole sequence of trials which, as we have seen in part, tested his faith and his fortitude during these years in Paris. But what Miguel Campos centres our attention on at this point in his thesis is the remarkable expansion of the Society's work which took place in the midst of, and despite, this alliance of forces seemingly bent on its dissolution. The mere chronology speaks for itself. In 1699 two schools were added in Paris to the four already mentioned, and in the same year, at the nearby town of Chartres, the Founder provided Brothers for two schools. In the July of the following year two Brothers were sent to open a school in Calais. Then followed foundations at Troyes and at Avignon in 1703, at Darnetal, Rouen and Dijon in 1705, at Marseilles in 1706, at Mende in 1706 or 1707, at Valréas and Alais in 1707, at Grenoble and Saint-Denis in 1708, at Mâcon and at Moulins in 1709, at Versailles and Boulogne in 1710 and at Les Vans in 1711. Miguel Campos seems justified in describing these developments as "a charismatic irradiation" of the work. Yet the initiative for all the foundations came not from John Baptist himself but from others – bishops, parish priests, social welfare groups (the history is studied in learned detail by Yves Poutet in the second volume of his work, *Le XVIIe Siècle et les Origines Lasalliennes*).

This paradox of an Institute just surviving from day to day in

the capital, but at the same time becoming known and sought after from north to south of the French kingdom (to borrow a phrase from Rigault) reveals (says Campos) the soundness of the form of administration the Founder had devised and which made it possible for him, in the midst of all his harassing distractions, to deploy the men and means for an effective response to the successive calls made upon him. But it would be an anachronism to think that the hierarchic and centralised form of government that had evolved under his direction had placed the Brothers in an attitude of passive dependence upon his person. It would likewise be inaccurate to assume that he conducted his Society by hard and fast rules, or that he created a monolithic pastoral structure in his schools. His particular gift was rather a capacity to bring strategically into play all the energies of ordinary men whose principal qualification was a desire to lead a life exclusively devoted to the poor, learning in the process the value of their consecration to the humble tasks of schoolmasters.

The way the Society was governed and the way the schools were conducted evolved from the combined experience of the Founder and that of his disciples, the driving inspiration being that their way of providing for an urgent social need was a means of “procuring the glory of God”. The term “Christian” carried full weight in the title the Institute had adopted for itself. Christian schools for a neglected area of a society which was officially Christian were what M. de La Salle and his Institute provided. In organising his schools the Founder believed himself to be accomplishing an ecclesial work, in the sense that he was enabling the poor to become integrated into the French social structure, which was a necessary step towards their becoming integrated into the Church. To achieve this end, he and his disciples acted “by association”, themselves constituting a truly Christian community, acting together in total dependence on Providence whose purpose they sought to discern in every event of the world they worked in, specifically the world of the poor to whom they sought to make known the good news of salvation.

John Baptist’s personal religious experience must (Campos reminds us) be considered in the context of his relations with others – with his Brothers in the first place, but also, now, with the persons who successively requested him to provide schools, and with the poor for

whom he readily, and with charismatic assurance, responded to these calls. Which is another way of saying that his fidelity to God's summons was achieved in a particular historical context made up of the religious and social cross-currents of the France of that time. It was an intramundane fidelity involving such requirements as the formation of masters equal to their tasks and the conducting of schools at an effective level. In neither area of concern was the second-rate sufficient: God's work required the best possible deployment of the available human ways and means. However self-evident this might seem to us at this distance of time, it was, in its context, an ideal that was, in fact, realisable only because of the unique existence of a community of laymen consecrated by vow to procuring God's glory by conducting schools.

And the Founder was no less sure of the way God willed the schools to be conducted than he was about the way his Community was to develop. Just as he had adopted an inflexible stance in the face of attempts to interfere with the autonomy of the Community, so too he showed firmness in upholding the principles of pedagogy which he deemed necessary "pour que les écoles aillent bien". We have seen this firmness illustrated in his procedures when he was asked by La Barmondière to assume full direction of the rue Princesse school. The changes he introduced, though he proceeded with charitable tact, provoked a hostile reaction, but he persisted because the welfare of the poor children attending the school was his first concern and it was evident to all that his changes were beneficial to them. Subsequent complaints by parish priests, for example at Vaugirard and later at Rouen, that the Brothers did not participate in the parish liturgical offices as fully as the curés thought that they should (for the edification of the people) were met by the argument (recorded by Blain) that the Brothers' proper place at the High Mass and at Vespers was with their pupils. Such a presence, said the Founder, formed a part of the process of Christian education for which the Institute existed: left to themselves on Sundays, might not the pupils lose the benefit of what they had gained throughout the week?

His displacement of Latin by French was inspired by the same concern for the children's ultimate good. The Bishop of Chartres, Paul Godet des Marais, was a personal friend of John Baptist since seminary days. He was also an influential figure of the time, the spiritual director of Madame de Maintenon and a friend of Bossuet,

Fénelon and other luminaries of the Paris scene. It was he also who had obtained for John Baptist the Cardinal Archbishop's approval for the establishing of a novitiate at Vaugirard. Nevertheless when, as Bishop of Chartres, he expressed grave concern that Latin was not being taught as the first language in the schools he had invited the Founder to open, the latter presented his case in a ten-point memorandum which Blain reproduces. His argument, as Miguel Campos notes, is not based on linguistic considerations but concentrates rather on the realities of life as lived by the poor children attending the schools. These needed all the available time (and it was in many cases of a very limited duration) to be given a sound Christian formation as well as a sufficient education for earning a reasonable living after leaving school. Moreover, a command of their mother-tongue would make it possible for them to supplement by their own reading the catechetical instruction they had received from the Brothers. The aim was not to train future clerics. The lads in the Brothers' classes needed a sufficient basic schooling to fit them to obtain and hold a job, as well as a grounding in the Christian faith which would remain firm and develop when the responsibility for it depended on themselves. Laborious hours spent on learning Latin seemed a hindrance rather than a help towards achieving these aims.

Incidentally the importance the Founder attached to sound secular instruction should not (Campos points out) be underestimated against his well-known insistence on the religious formation to be ensured in his schools. It is true that the catechism lesson had pride of place, but not at the expense of quality in the other lessons. The school as a whole was the pastoral agent; it did not exist simply to provide an opportunity for catechetical formation. Integration into the social structure, was the object in view, since without that integration there would be scant hope of perseverance in faith and religious practice.

Apropos of this Lasallian balance between the "sacred" and the "profane", Miguel Campos refers his readers to two chapters of his confrère Michel Sauvage's masterly work *Catéchèse et Laïcité*, namely the chapters headed (in translation): "The priority of religious teaching in the life of the Brother" and "The apostolic purpose of the Christian Schools and the profane teaching of the Brother". It is normally unfair to an author to quote even a substantial passage from a closely-argued discussion which extends through many pages, but a

translation of a couple of Br. Sauvage's paragraphs may be permitted here in view of their relevance to the point Miguel Campos is making at this stage in his thesis:

"John Baptist de La Salle was well aware of the existence of the two Cities – the temporal City and the City of God, the State and the Church. He makes express allusion to this concept in his Meditation for the feast of Saint Louis, King of France: *'Your mission requires you to labour both for the good of the Church and for that of your country. Your pupils are already members of the State and will soon be endowed with full citizenship. . .'* He neither confuses the two Cities nor opposes them to each other as irreconcilable foes. If in many of his Meditations he puts the Brothers on their guard against 'the world' it is, no doubt, because he is addressing men who have renounced the world in pursuit of a religious call. Nevertheless, it seems very much as if, like Saint John, he employs this term 'the world' sometimes to designate humanity in general and sometimes that part of humanity which rejects God and acts in hatred of Christ and his followers. Understood in this latter sense, the world has a 'spirit' which must be guarded against, but which threatens from within one's own self rather than by means of a localised activity which it would suffice to steer clear of. In fact, as the Founder makes repeatedly clear, the Brothers must, in the nature of their vocation, 'frequent the world'.

"Certainly the Saint in no way equates the world, in the pejorative sense just referred to, with the 'terrestrial City'. . . The work which the Brothers are called upon to accomplish in their schools is ordained to the good of the State. The teaching of the 'profane' disciplines, the human education they are obliged to give, will serve for the building of the earthly City: *'You will contribute to the good of your country by teaching your pupils to read and write and all that pertains to your profession.'* (Meditation 160). And again, emphasizing that one of the results of the education provided in the Christian Schools will be to prepare the pupils for their future career and thereby serve a useful purpose in the terms of this world, he writes: *'God has been pleased to supply a remedy. . . by the establishment of the Christian Schools, where the teaching is given free of charge and solely for the glory of God, and where pupils are kept all day and are taught reading, writing and religion. Thus they are prepared to earn their living as soon as their parents wish to make them do so.'* (Meditation 194)."

Seen against the background of the time, this refusal of the Founder to treat the secular instruction provided in his schools as of inferior importance compared with that of religious formation is evidence of the originality of his mind. As Michel Sauvage has written again (in a passage quoted by Campos):

“The Founder of the Brothers belonged to an epoch when the Church held, in practice, a monopoly in the field of education, especially that of primary education. The role of the State was not exactly non-existent in this area, but it consisted often, in France at least, in merely supporting the authority of the Church. And the Church saw its responsibility for the provision of schools from a religious perspective: it saw education as a privileged means of training in the faith. Instruction in the profane disciplines came second and was at that time very rudimentary.”

John Baptist de La Salle did not, in fact, raise in principle the question of the difference between “profane” and “Christian”. It is certainly true that he saw the activity of the Brothers as an apostolate, as a collaboration in God’s work of salvation. It is true that to achieve this apostolic purpose the Brothers were to propound the Good News by means of catechism lessons, thereby awakening and fostering faith in their young charges, so that the incorporation of the latter into the mystical body of Christ might be an ever-developing reality. The ministry of God’s word, exercised in this particular way of religious instruction, an authentic mission to which the Brothers were called by the Church, was undoubtedly seen by the Founder as the essence of his disciples’ task.

And yet, it was an order of schoolmasters that he founded, not an order of catechists. His sons are not called Brothers of Christian Doctrine, despite the fact that this title has often been bestowed upon them, sometimes even by writers who might have been expected to know better (like Etienne Gilson and Yves Congar). The carefully-considered title the Lasallians adopted from the beginning was “The Brothers of the Christian Schools”. And as schoolmasters they were to teach the “profane” disciplines – to prepare their pupils for life here below, to make a contribution to the building of the secular city.

But a difficulty arises in that certain expressions of the founder’s writings do, in fact, seem to give an exclusive aspect to the specifically apostolic aim of his Brothers’ work: expressions like, “*You received great graces from God when he called you from the world to a ministry where*

*you are concerned solely with the salvation of souls. . .* (Meditation 146) and “*You are made only for heaven, you should labour only for heaven. . .*”. Michel Sauvage answers this difficulty by suggesting that for the Founder the school as a whole was educative of the living faith of its children. The Brother was not to be a catechist functioning in a school situation nor a schoolmaster who doubled as a catechist. The one ultimate aim of the Lasallian school presupposed and ensured a profound unity in the ministry of the schoolmaster-catechist, so that the sense of responsibility and dedication brought to the one role was not devalued or diminished by that brought to the other.

Michel Sauvage pursues this argument at length and convincingly illustrates with detailed references to two of the Founder’s pedagogical works, the *Règles de la Bienséance et de la Civilité Chrétienne* and the *Conduite des Ecoles*. Miguel Campos refers us for this to the relevant pages of *Catéchèse et Laicat* and takes the discussion on from there. The opposition shown by the Writing Masters and the teachers of the Little Schools to the Founder’s work derived precisely from the latter’s particular understanding of the purpose of a school. For De la Salle, schools must be open to all and without payment of fees, because they were signs of the universalism and gratuity of salvation. John Baptist stood in opposition to the narrow interests of the corporations of schoolmasters, but the inflexibility he showed in this was less a social criticism of their mentality than a proof of his all-prevailing intention to be at the service of the poor. Of course, in so far as his opponents’ reactions jeopardised the making known of the Good News to the poor, his attitude constituted a criticism of them – just as the zeal of the biblical prophets for the rights of God turned them into critics of the adverse social influences of their time. But criticism was not the primary concern of the founder of the Christian Schools. The thrust of his enterprise was creative, his endeavour was to make the uniquely balanced apostolic services rendered by his schools as widely available as possible. The legal actions brought against him in Paris, the physical violence to which his work was subjected, caused neither the Founder nor his disciples to waver. Their firmness manifested not only that by now the Society was stable and self-assured in its purposes but also that it had a clear understanding of the unique nature of the mission with which it had been entrusted. The Brothers knew, with their Founder, that just as their religious life could not be identified with any of the classic

forms already recognised in the Church, so their way of conducting schools was motivated in a quite different way from that of the associations of schoolmasters who objected to their “damaging” presence.

The remarkable success which attended the procedures and dedication of this new type of schoolmasters was what made their presence damaging in the eyes of the protestors. And although that success was a community achievement the personal contribution of the Founder can hardly be overestimated. The demands made on John Baptist’s time and energy by the rapid expansion of the work have been delineated by Maurice Hermans in his *L’Institut des Frères des Écoles Chrétiennes à la recherche de son statut canonique. . .*: the appointment of the directors and assistants for the proliferating schools was still his personal responsibility; he had established the custom whereby each Brother wrote to him every month and (without fail, according to Blain) he replied individually (the majority of his extant letters are self-evidently of this kind); and he made personal visits to the communities in the various towns. And in the midst of all these preoccupations he found time and tranquillity to compose works of spirituality and pedagogy which provided his disciples with the guidance they needed both for their personal spiritual progress and for the efficient accomplishment of their professional tasks. Blain says that the Founder’s writings belong largely to the Vaugirard period, but Campos points out that nothing like such a considerable literary output could have been produced within such a limited period. If, in fact, we follow the chronology established by Léon de Marie Aroz, the extent in time of the Founder’s literary work covers just a quarter of a century, beginning in 1694 with *La Conduite des Ecoles* and *Les Regles de la Bienséance and de la Civilité Chrétienne* and continuing to nearly the end of his life when, at Saint-Yon, he composed his *Méditations* and *L’Explication de la Méthode d’Oraison*.

The purpose of the Founder’s writings was, says Miguel Campos, to give unity to the efforts of his disciples. His spiritual and ascetical works were not composed with the intention of constructing a system of spirituality in the abstract but always for the purpose of explaining and reinforcing the gospel inspiration of the Brothers’ teaching ministry. These writings, it is true, owe much to traditional spirituality as well as being influenced by the pervading religious mentality of their own time. Maurice Hermans has shown, in a

monograph entitled *Pour une meilleure lecture de nos Règles Communes* (1954), how the classical tradition of monasticism influenced the composition of the Brothers' Rules which, nevertheless, were themselves innovative with their chapters directed to the Brothers' work in the schools. And just as the Common Rules were true to the spirit of the norms of religious life which preceded them, so the Founder's pedagogical writings were influenced by works already promoting educational reform in 17th-century France. Much research, comments Miguel Campos, remains to be done to discover such influences and literary affiliations. (An excellent example of such ongoing research is to be found in the most recent work of Br. Jean Pungier, *JEAN-BAPTISTE DE LA SALLE: Le message de son Catéchisme*, Rome 1985.) But, says our guide, what catches our attention in these writings of the Founder is his sense of mission and association in his approach to the pedagogical question. In his borrowings from his predecessors he did not select ideas in the abstract or because they supported a pre-conceived theory of his own. He took ideas and practices in order to adapt them in the light of the accumulating daily experience of the Brothers. In the Preface to the *Conduite des Écoles* we find these words: "*This 'Conduite' has been compiled only after a great number of meetings with the senior Brothers of this Institute and with those who have shown most stability as teachers, and only after an experience of several years. . .*"

The evangelical dimension, in fact, is paramount in the pedagogy, not so much of John Baptist de La Salle himself but of an association of men who, thanks to him, possessed an understanding of their particular apostolic mission in the Church. His writings, both spiritual and pedagogical, envisage always the Christ of the Gospels and the mystery of the Blessed Trinity, considered not in abstract doctrinal terms but in terms of their manifestation through the immanent activity of God. Reference to the Trinity was to be inseparable from the daily work which was the fruit of consecration. The glory of God and "association to keep schools" were to be correlative in the life of the Brother. Consecration to the Trinity for a ministry of teaching, faith that the glory of God could certainly be procured by zeal in the service of the young, especially the poor and dispossessed – such was the synthesis which made the Brothers of the Christian Schools like no other religious congregation of men that had preceded them in the history of the Church, and like no other body of schoolmasters that the history of education had known.

## 13

### More “Paroles-Force”: The Personal Rules. . .

The first of the *paroles-force* chosen by Miguel Campos for an understanding of the Founder’s mind at this period of his life is a document the heading of which, in literal translation, is: “*The Rules I have imposed upon myself*. We know of it only from the pages of Blain, but there seems no reason to doubt its authenticity or indeed the fidelity with which Blain has transmitted it. The biographer introduces it with the following words:

“*In order to see to what extent M. de La Salle had set limits to his personal freedom we need only read the private set of rules he had prescribed for himself. It is a document which gives us reason to regret the loss of all the others which his humility caused him to dispose of. Divine Providence left this one in the hands of his disciples to be for them an everlasting memorial, an ever-living example, and a motive ever-new for imitating the regularity of their Father. Here it is just as it exists. . .*”

One of the first things one notices on reading this list of twenty rules of personal conduct is the resemblance of some of them to certain exhortations incorporated by the Founder into the *Collection of Short Treatises*. The verbal coincidences occurring in both texts lead Miguel Campos to the consideration of a possible common source. For this purpose he refers his readers to a work by Maurice Hermans and José A. Gareis, published as No. 16 in the *Cahiers Lasalliens* series under the title: *Contribution à l'étude des sources du Recueil de différents petits traités*. These researchers discovered what they describe as “an identity of structure, and a parallelism” as between the chapter of the *Collection* entitled *Reflections which the Brothers should make from time to time, especially during the Retreat* and a 17th-century work by a French Jesuit, Père Julien Hayneufve. They found also that nine of the *Rules I have imposed upon myself* have close parallels in the *Collection* and therefore in the Hayneufve work.

The study of the literary sources of the personal *Rules*, observes Campos, is evidently important, in that it tells us something not only about what authors John Baptist chose to read, but also about the ambience of religious ideas in which he moved. For the purpose of his thesis, however, Campos says that such study has a further

interest. It provides an opportunity to discover how far the Founder was able to take over the words of others to express his own deeply-felt convictions, so that the borrowed words become *paroles-force* of his personal religious experience. Of similar interest is the fact that he borrowed from Père Hayneuve not only to express his own understanding of God's purposes but also to educate his Brothers in their understanding of them – since he incorporated the borrowings not only into his personal rule of life but also into the *Collection* which he compiled for their spiritual instruction. Having found in certain examples of the Jesuit's terminology an adequate expression of his own need, he shared his discovery, so to speak with his disciples: his spiritual journey, as Campos insists, was made in company with others; he made them free of his own experience at every stage because the call of God to the enterprise of the schools was no less theirs than his.

An example of the parallelism existing between the two Lasallian texts is to be found in No. 3 of the *Rules I have imposed upon myself*. This reads as follows:

*“It is a good rule of conduct to make no distinction between the matters proper to one's state and the business of one's salvation and perfection; and to be convinced that one will never work better for one's salvation, and will never acquire greater perfection, than by accomplishing the duties of one's daily employment, provided that one carries these out in view of God's intention. It is necessary to keep that always in mind.”*

The corresponding passage from the *Collection* is the one already quoted in an earlier context (p.98). Miguel Campos reminds us that when John Baptist made this rule his own, and before sharing it with his Brothers, the “duties of (his) daily employment” were being accomplished in terms of multiple journeyings to various houses of the Society, personal and written communications with his disciples, negotiations with the various authorities seeking the services of the Brothers and, of course, the recurring need to defend the Society's rights against adverse influences. This No. 3 of his personal *Rules* showed that he had understood the vital unity of a relationship with God, discoverable in the accomplishment of a mission. For him, God was not to be found in isolation from the business of living and working: God was where he willed his servants to be; he was to be found in the faithful accomplishment of the tasks his will had imposed. Working out one's salvation was not, in John Baptist's understanding, a subjective pursuit involving some kind of escape

from the realities of one's life; it was the continuous discovery of God in all that happened in one's relationships with others, particularly in association with others for the fulfilment of God's purpose. Not, of course, that John Baptist's life was one of feverish activity, totally caught up in the interplay of events and influences. The serenity with which, in the midst of so many distracting forces, he was able to pilot the work to success, derived from his sustained watch for the hand of God in all that happened.

Nor was this search for the divine purpose to be allowed to become a dream of utopian ideals pursued in spite of, rather than by means of, the down-to-earth realities of life. Campos underlines this by quoting another of the personal rules, No. 14:

*"It is a good rule to be less concerned about knowing what one will have to do than about doing perfectly what one knows is to be done."*

The "ideal" is attainable at every moment, since each moment yields its divine purpose to one whose mind is set on doing God's will. The important thing is to accomplish that moment's behest as perfectly as one can. The Founder's own existence, particularly at this period of the rapid multiplication of the schools, was a continuous response to needs from resources which were only too limited and, as we have seen, he was, on occasion, pressurised by circumstances into making appointments which proved to be unfortunate. But he remained tranquil no less among the failures than amid the successes that punctuated his efforts, because his motive in all he did was to find the best possible means to achieve what he knew was needed.

Like the 3rd personal rule, this 14th one is also to be found in the same chapter of the *Collection*, formulated thus in the English edition:

*"Strive to perform your actions as perfectly as you know how, without being worried about how perfectly they may be performed. By doing as well as you know how, you deserve to learn and know that perfection of which you are still ignorant. Be satisfied with what you can do, since God is satisfied; but do not spare yourself when grace comes to your assistance. Be convinced that with the divine help you can do more than you imagine."*

In thus sharing this particular piece of wisdom with his disciples, John Baptist wanted them to understand that perfection could only be sought for within the concrete realities of their existence, and that there must be no discouragement when the result fell short of the

intention. At the same time, they must trust that God's grace could enable them to achieve more than they could aspire to by their own powers, and that therefore co-operation with that grace was a condition, as well as a guarantee, of success. By bringing all their energy and natural talent to bear on the accomplishment of their modest tasks as parish schoolmasters, they would, because God's grace would foster their efforts, lead their pupils to salvation and to holiness, and at the same time grow themselves into that likeness of Christ which is the ultimate perfection.

Another of the *Rules I have imposed upon myself* continues to ponder this question of the ideal and the reality. No. 8 runs thus:

*"I shall always consider the work of my salvation and that of establishing and directing our Community as God's work. Hence I shall commit to him the care of all this, so as to do nothing of what concerns me without his orders. I shall often consult him on all I shall have to do, whether it relates to the one or to the other, often saying to him those words of the prophet Habakkuk: Lord, it is your work."*

In other words, if the tasks that fell to John Baptist as Founder were assumed and fulfilled as a response to the incessant summoning of a God who works out his plan of salvation in the unfolding of history, all such tasks, so far from distancing him from God, provided the very context of the divine companionship which sustained him in his faith-journey. Salvation is God's work, not the product of man's striving for personal perfection. In the consolidation and expansion of the Society of the Christian Schools John Baptist saw only the saving activity of God, and it was to this God, recognised in the daily sequence of human events, that he abandoned himself and the matter of his own salvation and sanctification.

Miguel Campos proceeds to a consideration of the 9th of the personal rules which may be translated:

*"I must often recall that I am like an implement, useful only in the hands of a worker; and that therefore I must await the orders of divine Providence before acting, without, however, letting these orders go by default once they are known."*

The first comment of our guide on this rule is that a study of its linguistic content would be enlightening. The simile of an implement in the hands of a worker carried particular overtones in the context of the religious ideas of the 17th century, a period when Thomist theology and the decrees of the Council of Trent were

exercising a powerful influence on the movement for reform among the French clergy. The idea of man as an “implement”, useless until made use of by God, relates to the Thomist concept of God as first cause and man as instrumental cause. The Founder’s use of this model reveals in him a consciousness of unaided man’s incapacity for good, but there was nothing negative or passive about his awareness of this: he was very far (as the quoted rule shows) from letting the orders of Providence “*go by default*” once he knew what they were. It was his wish, as “implement”, to respond as perfectly as possible to the touch of the divine Worker’s hand, and the fulness of the response was to be seen in the success of the schools.

The general effect of Miguel Campos’s commentary on these personal rules is to show the consistency of John Baptist’s reflections on God’s dealings with him. Thus he next quotes for comment Rule No. 5 which runs:

*“I shall unite my actions to those of Jesus Christ at least twenty times a day, and I shall strive to make my views and intentions accord with his. For this purpose I shall have a small piece of paper which I shall pierce each time I make my act of union; and for every one that I shall have omitted on any day, I shall say a Pater before retiring, kissing the floor once for each Pater.”*

As Campos says, this rule cannot be appreciated without reference to the others. It would misconstrue the Founder’s intention if we gave undue weight to the element of computation contained in this rule – an element which reflects the particular type of personal devotion favoured at the time the Founder wrote, and which felt the need to support the wavering will by setting “targets” to be achieved and sanctions to be applied in case of failure. The device may well seem to be no more than a psychological help to spiritual progress, but to stop short at defining it thus would be to misunderstand that the conformity with Jesus Christ which John Baptist sought was indissociably linked with the will to carry out the orders of Providence. His “target” was not twenty acts of union a day, but a sustained – though repeatedly willed – identification with the mind of Christ, who came not to do his own will but the will of the Father who had sent him (Jn. 6,38), whose very food was to do his Father’s will and accomplish his work (Jn. 4,34), whose judgement was just because he sought not his own will but the will of him who sent him (Jn. 5,30), who did as the Father had commanded him so that the world might know that he loved the Father (Jn. 14,31). . . It was a

sublime aspiration, this conformity with Christ, which John Baptist formulated in this fifth rule of personal conduct, but its fulfilment was to be sought in the harsh reality of the circumstances in which his life was cast. Unsparing attention to the multifarious needs which pressed in upon him was his way of participating in the mystery of Christ, and it is not surprising if, as a child of his time, he felt the value of “accountability” as a device to keep his purity of intention firm. The point is that conformity with Jesus Christ was not understood by John Baptist as an abstract ideal attained by a mere repetition of a prayer (twenty a day!) but (after the example of Christ) only as a persistent, unwearying application of all his human powers to fulfilling each behest of God as revealed to him in the circumstances of each day.

Nevertheless, such an aspiration and such a fulfilment presupposed a life of intense prayer – an aspect of the spirituality of John Baptist de La Salle on which his earliest biographers dwell at some length. His self-identification with Christ included his divine model’s ever-present concern to pray for his disciples. In the 6th of the personal rules, the Founder wrote:

*“When my Brothers come to seek my advice I shall ask our Lord to answer for me. If what they ask is a matter of some consequence I shall take a little time to pray over it and shall at least be careful to recollect myself and elevate my heart to God during a suitable period of time.”*

But in thus seeking divine guidance for what he must advise his Brothers, the Founder was seeking what was best also for the mission in which they were involved. For the journey he had so far travelled with them had convinced him that their spiritual well-being was inseparable from the common task to which they, with him, had been called; and that in praying for guidance for them he was praying for the prosperity of their work – which was God’s work.

The Saint’s uncompromising adherence to the divine will could hardly be expressed in more convincing terms than those which make up Nos. 1, 2 and 18 of the personal rules.:

*“I shall not leave the house without need and without having taken a quarter of an hour to examine before God whether the need is a real or an imaginary one. If the matter seems urgent I shall take at least the length of the time required for the recitation of a Miserere to think it over and to put myself in the right frame of mind for the task. . . Every day I shall set aside a quarter of an hour to renew the consecration of myself to the Most Holy Trinity. . . I shall take means to elevate my mind to God as often as*

*I begin a fresh action; and whatever I undertake, I shall make a point of not beginning until I have prayed about it."*

Once again the practical measures ("a quarter of an hour". . . "the time required for the recitation of a *Miserere*". . .) reflect the religious ambience in which John Baptist had grown up, but when we seek beyond these to the essence of what he says, we find a living determination to remain attentive, at every juncture of the day's unfolding, to the divine will – to be an implement functioning only in response to the touch of God's hand. Quite simply, for the Founder prayer was inseparable from action. It is interesting, in fact, (comments Miguel Campos) to notice that for a man who made no distinction between the affair of his salvation and perfection and the duties of state, the prayer which he deemed (in the rules just quoted) an indispensable preliminary to action shows his gift of discernment. The period of creative action outlined in the last chapter was no less a period of intense prayer for John Baptist personally and for his disciples.

Underlying all these *Rules I have imposed upon myself* one senses a profound conviction that time is a commodity to be used for God alone – that all time is "God's time". In some of the rules this conviction is made particularly explicit, as when the Founder writes:

*"In whatever new situation I find myself I shall keep to a fixed timetable, trusting in the grace of our Lord to be able to do this, since I have never managed to do it of myself. And the first thing I shall do when my situation changes will be to spend a day in retreat for the purpose of drawing up a new personal programme."* (No.10)

*"I must take measures about the time I have wasted and be careful never to lose any more. A long retreat will be necessary for me to be able to develop due vigilance in this matter."* (No.13)

*"Every morning I shall take a quarter of an hour to foresee how to acquit myself well of the tasks I shall have to perform. I shall plan my whole day accordingly."* (No.15)

The Founder's biographers (remarks Campos) in their presentation of him as a perfect model of every virtue, have overlooked the very human traits revealed in these last extracts from the personal rules. John Baptist was overwhelmed with work, with unforeseen emergencies and with difficulties of all kinds; and the need he felt for a programme, his dissatisfaction with himself for never having managed to adhere to one, was purely religious in its inspiration.

Temperamentally, no doubt, he inclined to orderliness and method and indeed the evidence of his history and his writings runs counter to his self-criticism in this matter. But such self-criticism is understandable as the expression of a conscience acutely sensitive to the idea that time is a gift of God and every moment an opportunity for fulfilling his will.

This attention to the value of time shows the seriousness of the Founder's commitment to his mission. Consciousness of the passing of time, of the irrevocability of moments lost, of the uncertainty of the allocation of time to come, the haunting image, so to speak, of the hour-glass ever present to the mind's eye, such was the measure of the intensity of the Saint's sense of God's presence in his life. Consciousness of this presence of God everywhere is another pervading theme of the personal rules, as in the one already quoted about his intention to elevate his mind to God at the beginning of every fresh action, and in the following 19th article:

*"It is a rule of the Community never to enter the house or one's room without a prayer and a renewal of one's attention to God's presence. I shall take care myself not to fail in this."*

Such terminology could well seem to postulate limits of time and place on God's activity in his creatures' lives – as if the divine assistance were dependent on one's having specifically prayed for it. But the "make no distinction" element in the Founder's spirituality sufficiently refutes any such implication. Certainly John Baptist himself was no less closely united to God when he was absorbed in the conflicting calls on his attention than when he was "elevating his mind" to the Lord before commencing an action. Miguel Campos suggests that a study of the *Explanation of the Method of Mental Prayer* would throw light on the Saint's total reference to God amid the centrifugal pull of intramundane affairs.

Our guide has an interesting reflection at this point in his discussion which raises the question of the nature of divine revelation. The Founder's insistence on the practice of the presence of God, combined with his constant recourse to Scripture in his writings, leaves no doubt as to the reality of his concept of a divine plan already fulfilled in the past. The spirituality he offered his Brothers invited them to apply to themselves the mysteries of Christ revealed in the New Testament, imitating his virtues made familiar to them by constant meditation thereon, drawing upon his merits for their progress in holiness and the fruitfulness of their apostolate. It is

a sublime formula, one which has led innumerable Lasallians to high levels of sanctity, some few to the ultimate reaches of achieved or potential canonisation.

What has perhaps been insufficiently noticed, however, is that this self-application of the revelation contained in Scripture (and, of course, in its interpretation by the Church) can only be made in the existential circumstances of each one's life, with all the variations which that implies for different generations, different places and times. Miguel Campos makes the point that precisely the Founder's attachment to the sense of God's presence in every moment of his busy and distracting life, expresses in a certain manner the reality of God's continuing revelation of himself to each individual.

The present writer was prompted at this point in his reading of the Campos thesis to turn back to a book by Bishop Christopher Butler O.S.B., published by Darton, Longman and Todd in 1967 under the title *The Theology of Vatican II* – the printed version of the Sarum Lectures which the Bishop had delivered at Oxford the previous year. Chapter 2 of this book, written with the authority of one who, as Abbot of Downside, had been an influential participant at the Council, is a discussion of the Dogmatic constitution on "Divine Revelation". The discussion seemed to the present writer to provide fresh insights into this area of John Baptist de La Salle's thought and conduct. It should be said that Campos makes no reference to this or any other work of Bishop Butler either here or in his extensive bibliography; but a brief look, with quotation, at the Bishop's discussion will not, it is hoped, be a mere digression from the Lasallian's line of thought.

Dr. Butler remarks that the Council's Constitution does not begin, as a manual of dogmatic theology might, with a scholastic definition of the term "divine revelation". Tanquerey's *Brevior Synopsis*, for example, offers one such definition in these words: "Divine revelation is the manifestation of some truth made to us by God through a supernatural illumination of the mind" – following which Tanquerey provides a discourse on scholastic cognitive psychology. "But what is missing here," comments Butler, "is any reference to the personal Thou-and-I relationship which may be set up between him who receives a divine revelation and God who reveals." The Tanquerey concept leaves the impression of a "third-personal enrichment of the intellect rather than a second-personal self disclosure to the heart."

But, continues Butler, "it is precisely this element that is brought into the foreground in the Constitution: God does not simply increase men's store of speculative knowledge; he addresses them as his friends and 'holds converse with them'; his immediate purpose is both to make known the mystery of his will and to disclose himself; and his ulterior purpose is not only to invite but to take them into fellowship with himself. . . ." The Bishop develops this theme for a page or so and then quotes a passage from Section 2 of the Constitution as follows: "This plan ('oeconomia') of revelation takes place by deeds and words intrinsically interconnected, so that the works wrought by God in the history of salvation manifest the teaching and realities signified by the words and corroborate them; while the words proclaim the works and illuminate the mystery contained in them." And Bishop Butler comments: "Thus we see that, according to our Constitution, the notion of divine revelation, as it concerns the Christian gospel, is part of a larger notion of divine action in history; it is not by 'words' alone, but by 'deeds and words' that the revelation is given."

It would take this incidental discussion too far to attempt to consider the treatment of this theme by a fellow-Lasallian of Miguel Campos, Gabriel Moran. Campos does not refer to him at this point in his thesis any more than he does to Bishop Butler, but he does list all Moran's works on the nature and theology of revelation in his bibliography, and in the general introductory section of his thesis he refers his readers specifically to Moran's *Theology of Revelation* (1966) and *The Present Revelation* (1972).

But here it must suffice to observe simply that the new light thrown on the nature of divine revelation first by the Constitution *Dei Verbum* itself and then by its commentators, adds a considerable degree of richness to our understanding of John Baptist de La Salle's spirituality. We appreciate better what Miguel Campos is intending when he writes at this point "In the facts of M. de La Salle's life, as we know them, we discover that his pervasive consciousness of God's presence expresses, in a certain manner, the 'presentness' of revelation in its most concrete historical form." We gain a new insight into Campos's persistent theme that the Founder lived out his relationship with God not in a self-devised isolation from the world and from the men of his time, but in a freely accepted and total commitment to the world, a commitment by which God's revelation was mediated to him. Needless to say, such revelation was

monitored, so so speak, at every stage by the revelation already stored in John Baptist's consciousness from his familiarity with Scripture and his loving and constant adherence to the Church's teaching. But his itinerary was a sustained progress in the knowledge of God's mysterious ways, and that itinerary was followed – with others – in a particular world at a particular time.

Christ was the supreme revelation of God and this revelation too was presented to mankind in historical terms: Christ revealed his Father in the world of his time, defined with careful deliberation by Saint Luke in the early pages of his Gospel. And in the solemn prayer uttered on the eve of his passion, and recorded by Saint John, Jesus dwelt on this theme of God's presence discoverable in the world, whilst pointing the paradox that the world is in need of salvation: "I do not pray that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; thy word is truth. As thou didst send me into the world, so I have sent them into the world . . ." (Jn.17,15ff.). John Baptist de La Salle understood the paradox well. His doctrine of separation from the world is integral to his spirituality: but the mission God revealed to him could hardly have been more intramundane.

Campos quotes two more of the personal rules which have reference to the Founder's attitude to the world. First, No. 4:

*"When I go to see someone, I shall take care to say only what is necessary and not to talk about worldly or useless matters, and to stay no longer than half an hour at the most."*

and next, No. 12:

*"When anyone, whether in authority or not, hurts my feelings or, naturally speaking, seriously upsets me, I shall take care not to speak about it; and if someone else raises the subject with me, I shall make excuses for the persons who have injured me and justify their behaviour."*

The Founder's biographers place much emphasis on his love of silence and retreat, his withdrawal from the "world", and also of his self-effacing meekness. But, says Campos, in some instances they come very close to caricature – for example, in what they say about his relations with his family, about his self-seclusion at Vaugirard and, towards the end of his life, at Saint-Yon. This insistence of the biographers on his "separation from the world" could lead the reader to a quite erroneous understanding of the Founder's religious experience. His involvement with the world is, in fact, underlined in

other examples of the *Rules I have imposed upon myself* which show him dealing with the problems arising from his ministry. The problem, for instance, of prayer and personal devotions when travelling. In rule No. 11 he wrote:

*“When I have to go into the country I shall make a day’s retreat by way of preparation, putting myself in the right frame of mind to make at least three hours of meditation a day while I am on the road.”*

and he supplements this with Rule 17:

*“I must also make sure not to let a single day pass, whilst I am out of town, without visiting the Most Blessed Sacrament; every time I am in reach of a village church I shall enter, to kneel in adoration before the M.B. Sacrament.”*

Such resolutions, comments Campos, speak for themselves of the intramundane dimension of M. de La Salle’s religious experience. Schools to be founded and then put on a secure footing involved visits to the various communities and meetings with the civil and ecclesiastical authorities. Slow and comfortless journeys were part of the pattern of his life. And amidst them all, the hunger for prayer persisted because prayer was his lifeline to God who had called him to the task and on whose guidance and strengthening power he was consciously dependent at every moment of his busy days. Campos quotes two other personal rules which have direct reference to the subject of prayer. No. 16 reads as follows:

*“In the past I have often failed to say my rosary although this is a prayer prescribed for the Community. From now on, I shall not retire to bed any day without having first said this prayer.”*

and, in similar vein, No. 20:

*“Every day, I shall recite one Pater Noster with the utmost devotion, attention and faith, as an act of submission to our Lord who taught us this prayer and bade us say it.”*

The first of these two quotations reminds us that in imposing rules of conduct on himself, John Baptist was not acting independently of the rules already in practice in his communities. The earliest known draft of the *Règles Communes* has for article 7 of Chapter 3 the following: *“None of the Brothers shall omit to say the rosary every day, and if any one of them has been unable to say it with the community, he will make it good at some other time indicated by the Brother Director.”* Campos notes that the Saint’s admission, in the formulation of his personal rule on this subject, that he has “often failed” to fulfil this rule of the Community, speaks eloquently of the absorbing demands

made on his time and attention by the responsibilities accruing to him. It reflects also, as do the other relevant ones quoted, a certain anxiety lest those responsibilities should cause a diminution in his application to prayer. Whatever his “duties of state” involved, he was intent to preserve explicit moments for prayer, personal or with the community – explicit moments of communication with God.

Incidentally, the particular devotion to the Our Father just noted in his personal rule No. 20 is reflected also in the “Considerations. . .” listed in the *Collection*, where we read: “*Consider that God has promised to hear prayer well said; there is no doubt about obtaining all that is contained in the Lord’s Prayer, if we place no obstacle in the way, since it is the noblest, most excellent, most efficacious of all prayers.*” And this devotion in turn reflects the Founder’s sense of identification with Christ, the divine model, who was ceaselessly attentive to the work his Father had sent him to do, and whose communication with his Father was unceasing.

This habitual purpose of self-identification with Christ is at the heart of the one personal rule still to be quoted, No.7, which reads:

*“When the Brothers tell me their faults I shall deem myself blameworthy before God for my failure to prevent those faults, whether by the helpful advice I should have given them or by watching over them. And if I give them a penance, I shall give myself a greater one; when a fault is considerable I shall add to my penance a period of private prayer, a half-hour or even an hour, on several successive days, just to beg God’s pardon. For if I accept that I represent our Lord to them, then I am obliged to take their sins upon myself, as our Lord took ours upon himself. This is a responsibility which God has placed upon me for the sake of the Brothers.”*

The theme here is penance in imitation of Jesus Christ, and the Founder’s penitential spirit is a trait that the Institute has particularly remembered, following therein Blain’s reading of the life. But while Blain was happy to describe his hero as “*one of the great penitents of the 17th century*” and to substantiate the claim intermittently throughout the Life and with circumstantial verbiage in the relevant chapter of the *Spirit and Virtues*, what has been less noticed in the Institute tradition on this subject is the relationship between the penitential spirit and practice and the commitment to an enterprise. In the spirituality of the 17th century, self-effacement by mortification was the recognised means of leaving the field free for the divine action. The will to maintain the undertaking of the Christian Schools in the line intended for it by divine Providence was

the motivation for what Blain calls M. de La Salle's "*holy excuses*" in the sphere of penance. This understanding on the Founder's part explains why, in the personal rule just quoted, he associates himself with his disciples to the extent of assuming responsibility for their faults. However earnestly he might personally strive to please God in all that he did, the enterprise of the schools could be threatened, or at least distorted, by infidelities within the Community as a whole, and for such infidelities, vicarious satisfaction must be made. It was a spirituality identifiable, as has been mentioned, with a particular period in the Church's history; but at the same time there was a certain logic about it, quite independent of time and place, for one who, like John Baptist de La Salle, had a profound sense of Christ's redemptive role and a Pauline conviction of his own participation in the work of redemption.

## 14

### *And Some Letters*

To his study of the personal rules Miguel Campos appends a supplementary consideration of certain passages of the Founder's correspondence which, says Campos, "constitutes a collection of writings of priceless value for a study of M. de La Salle's religious experience and of the way he interpreted that experience in the accomplishment of his mission." The *Letters* provide a direct witness to his manner of guiding the Brothers and administering the Society, bringing his disciples to an ever-deepening understanding of the significance of their work as schoolmasters. And we who, at this distance of time, have the privilege of reading these letters, relatively few though they are (53 originals and some 42 copies out of a probable total of thousands), gain insights into the mind and heart of their writer which only personal letters, not intended for publication, can give.

Campos selects for special consideration a group of letters belonging specifically to the period of the Founder's life which we have been reviewing in chapter 12, the period of the remarkable expansion in the number of the Society's schools. They were letters written between 1701 and 1711 to three of the Founder's disciples in particular, Brothers Denis, Clement and Anastase. Campos draws attention to this small group of letters (five in all) to demonstrate how certain constant themes emerge – and therefore tell us much about the Saint's contemplation at this busiest and most preoccupying period in his life as Founder.

One such theme (it is no surprise to discover) is the need for the Brothers to refer all things to the will of God. Thus, in a letter dated 26 June 1706, he wrote to Clement (Jacques Gatelet, a teacher at Laon who had entered the Society in April 1700 and was twenty-two at the time he received this letter):

*"Take care, I beseech you, to be prudent and to conform to the will of God in everything, and above all by submission, not only exterior but interior. . . To have God in view when performing your actions is the best way of doing them well. God demands not only the exterior part of our*

*acts, but he requires that they should be performed with becoming interior dispositions.*”\*

An earlier letter, this time to Brother Denis (Jean-Louis Guynand, who had made his profession at Vaugirard in 1697) contains this advice:

*“It is not enough to have the wish to go to God in the most perfect manner possible; you must actually do so, and this is accomplished only in so far as we do ourselves violence. . . I rejoice at your abandonment to God, and at your indifference to being sent anywhere. This is very necessary in our Society.”*

On such passages Campos comments that in the Founder’s understanding, abandonment to the will of God is nothing other than the ready acceptance of existing situations which have developed from a conscious purpose of accomplishing that will. But such acceptance must not be a passive thing – complacency in success and resignation in failure. The emphasis is on doing what is discerned to be God’s will – even at the cost of doing violence to one’s own – and doing it as perfectly as possible, not just wishing to do so.

Nevertheless, prayer and the remembrance of God’s presence are never to be separated from this preoccupation with the daily tasks to be accomplished. In the same letter to Denis, John Baptist wrote:

*“Make it a habit also to think often of the holy presence of God, for this is the chief fruit of mental prayer. It would be of little use to you, however, if you did not strive to mortify yourself, or if you sought after your own comfort.”*

This and the previous extract from the letter to Denis give the impression that the latter, in his monthly reddition to the Founder, had either been frank about his tendency to seek his own comfort or had complained about the lack of comfort in the community he was in. But once the ascetical principle has been affirmed in the Founder’s reply – that progress in virtue is conditional on a degree of self-denial – a note of encouragement enters and it is prompted not by an abstract principle but by the circumstances of the Society’s work at the time the reply was written. The Founder is pleased with Denis’s spirit of “*abandonment to God*”, especially as manifested by the Brother’s “*indifference to being sent anywhere whatsoever*” because, adds the Saint, “*this is very necessary in our Society*”. The need to be

\*The letters are quoted from the Battersby translation: *De La Salle: Letters and Documents* (1952).

able to move a Brother from one community to another, and at short notice, was beginning to be urgent at this time when the demands for new schools were reaching the Founder with growing insistence.

The same inseparability between spirituality and apostolate comes through in a sentence from the one extant letter to Brother Anastase (Antoine Paradis, aged 22 when he received this letter and a member of the Society from less than two years previously):

*“Often enter into yourself in order to renew and increase the remembrance of the presence of God. The more you try to procure it, the easier it will be for you to perform your actions well and accomplish your duty (‘devoirs’ the Founder’s usual words for school tasks)”*

Campos notes that practically all the Founder’s letters to Brothers that we possess contain one or other reference to their school work – advice on difficulties experienced therein, exhortations to ensure the efficient conduct of the establishment. This passage from another letter to Brother Denis is typical:

*“Deal in a few words with the people who call at the school, in order not to make the pupils lose time. Be careful to correct the pupils – the ignorant even more than the others. It is shameful to call them abusive names. . . I am glad that you now have a large number of pupils. Try to keep the number up . . .”*

Characteristic also is this reminder to Brother Clement of the rules relating to school work:

*“Mind you do not strike the pupils with your hand. You know that this is forbidden by Rule. . . If you know of any way in which I could prevent the classes of our Brothers from getting out of hand, I should be much obliged if you would let me know, for we must do our best to strengthen them. . . I am of the opinion that the pupils who attend irregularly or who come late should be sent away, for it brings disorder in a school to tolerate the one or the other.”*

Both these brief extracts are revealing of the mind of the Founder at this period. His consciousness of the value of time, which we noted earlier, and also his scale of priorities, can be discerned in the opening words of the quotation from his letter to Denis. The joy he shows in the same extract that Denis’s school has “a large number of pupils” has nothing to do with income to the community, since no pupil paid fees, but only to do with the number of young people able to have the advantage of his disciples’ tutelage – the number of the poor able to have the good news made known to them. Also, the large

number of pupils is taken as a sign that Denis's school is functioning well and, as has been noted already, the efficient working of the schools remained a dominant preoccupation of the Founder.

The quoted extract from the letter to Clement provides impressive evidence that M. de La Salle regarded his disciples as collaborators in a mission as much as religious to be directed in the path of holiness. He will be "*much obliged*" to be told by Clement (aged twenty-two) of any way the latter knows to help the Brothers who are having discipline problems. It is interesting, however, that the sentence immediately preceding this request for advice reads: "*Take only one defect at a time for your Particular Examen, and keep it for several days running*". In the letter to Denis, immediately before telling him not to cause the pupils to lose time, the Founder had written: "*Mental prayer is the mainstay of piety, hence apply yourself most sedulously*". The way in which, in fact, the Saint passes in his letters from the subject of school to spiritual matters and vice-versa (with total disregard for literary effect) is evidence in itself that for him the two aspects of the Brothers' life were inseparable. We are enabled to see how, having laid down the principle of unity between the practices of the religious life and the efficient conduct of the schools, he fostered its observance in the person-to-person situation of the correspondence.

We notice also, in reading the letters, that the Founder, while setting the highest ideals in his advice, writes as one who is well aware of his disciples' limitations. In this connection it is instructive (as Miguel Campos points out) to focus one's attention on a sequence of letters directed to a particular Brother – an illustration, in Campos terms, of how the spiritual journey of the Founder merged with that of his early disciples. There are two series which are particularly illustrative here, namely ten letters to Brother Mathias and twenty to Brother Gabriel Drolin.

The early registers leave us uncertain about the identity of Mathias but it is evident from John Baptist's letters to him that he was, in Battersby's words, "an exceptionally unstable character. . . never pleased wherever he was". But the Founder deals with him with a delicately-balanced combination of forbearance and reproof from which we derive the impression that Mathias's happiness was second to none of the Saint's many preoccupations but that he was not prepared to let his disciple think that happiness could be achieved without self-discipline. The relevant letters could be quoted almost at random:

*“There is nothing I desire more than to be able to help you in your difficulties. . . Let me know all your troubles. . .”* (3.12.1706)

*“I know how you were in Paris, and I believe that you are more sick in mind than in body. As long as you are submissive God will uphold you. I am sorry that you should be annoyed. I shall do all I possibly can to take away your annoyance.”* (18.11.1707)

In fulfilment of this promise John Baptist gave Mathias the change of community he had asked for, but the move failed to bring the restless disciple peace and the Founder responded energetically, though with patience still intact:

*“I do not know why you wrote to me in such an ungracious manner and so contrary to the truth. . . You should not have insisted so much on my sending you so far if you wanted to come back so soon. As you see, it is not possible to bring Brothers back such a distance before Easter, nor to send any there, and we should not undertake journeys to obtain a dispensation from fasting during Lent. . . Rest assured, my very dear Brother, that I shall do everything that is required for you.”* (30.12.1707)

Tenderness and forbearance continue to prevail in the Founder’s dealings with the wayward Mathias, but we see also that the Saint desists from taking over the disciple’s responsibility for his own “itinerary”:

*“I shall see that you are led to God with gentleness and not harshness. There is nothing I shall not do for your good and for your salvation, but, on your part, you must act more graciously and not by impulse or anger. . . You must go to God, my very dear Brother, and work out your salvation. Do not abuse the means which God gives you.”* (13.1.1708)

Patience (and, no doubt, the prayers of the Saint) provided a therapy the gradual effectiveness of which can be discerned from the letters. In due course we find the following:

*“I am greatly delighted at the good dispositions you are in at present to remain in your vocation, which is a very sanctifying one for you, and to accomplish your duty in it. . . You are right in apologising for your letters, for they have occasionally been not only indiscreet, but very abusive, and I cannot understand how you can write in such a way. I have tried, however, not to take offence and, as far as I am concerned, to bear no grudge. . . Try and acquire, I beseech you, a level, steady and submissive spirit, for otherwise God would not bless you. I commend myself to your prayers in this holy season. . .”* (4.4.1708)

What comes through perhaps most noticeably (and movingly) in this correspondence with Mathias is John Baptist’s total lack of self-

importance, the complete absence of any sign of personal offence or of wounded dignity. At the time he was writing these letters to the difficult disciple, his name and (in human terms, which of course he would have rejected) his achievements were known in many parts of France. Yet he was corresponding with Mathias at a quite uncondescending, person-to-person level, as a pilgrim discoursing with a fellow-pilgrim on a journey which God had planned for both. Mathias was even led by this disposition of the Founder to indulge in abuse – a grotesque error which he seems gradually to have recognised with shame and regret. In the final letter of the series, John Baptist was able to write such things as:

*“I am glad to see you in the disposition to go ~~wherever~~ I want to send you. . . I am pleased you like the region where you are and that you wish in future to give me as much pleasure as you have caused me annoyance. . . I am very pleased to know that you wish to make yourself useful in every way. . . I shall not omit to pray, as you ask me, so that God may grant you perseverance to the end of your days. . .”*  
(16.5.1708)

And, in fact, if (following both Rigault and Battersby) we identify this Brother Mathias with Laurent de Douay, the *Catalogue des Frères des Ecoles Chrétiennes*, preserved at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, informs us that he died in the Institute at Guise (date not given) – a happy, if unlikely, ending to a chequered journey which had, however, the immensely compensating advantage of having been made in the company of a saint.

Campos takes his final examples of the way John Baptist’s letters serve as a supplementary *parole-force* for this period of his life, from the correspondence with Brother Gabriel Drolin – a correspondence which reflects (says Campos) a journeying more fascinating even than that travelled by John Baptist with Mathias, and one deserving of a full monographic study. Our guide notes that the tone of the Founder’s letters to Gabriel reminds us of the particular bond which existed between them, sealed on the day in 1691, ten years before Gabriel’s departure for Rome, when both, together with Nicolas Vuyart, pronounced the “heroic vow”. The trust in Providence which had formed the basis of that vow is a recurrent theme of the letters to the disciple in distant Rome. One such reference is singled out by Campos as a particularly revealing comment about the Founder’s own way of envisaging Providence at this most fecund period of the Society’s expansion:

*“As for myself, I do not like to put myself forward in any way, and I shall not do so at Rome more than anywhere else. Providence must make the first step, and I am content when it appears that I act according to its dictates.”*

The letter in which he wrote those words is dated 28 August 1705, and that year, as we have seen, marked the high point of the expansion of the work. Busy as John Baptist was in human terms, he was not, according to this avowal to Drolin, taking initiatives himself but simply following those which he attributed to Providence. The enterprise, as he kept reminding the Brothers, was “God’s work”. At the same time, the letters to Drolin exemplify particularly well the Founder’s realistic assessment of the human factors involved in fostering the enterprise. Sometimes a long letter is taken up almost entirely with “business” details. For example, the one addressed from Paris exactly a week after the one just quoted, contains an early rebuke for Gabriel’s failure to notify him of a change of address and then goes on to the question of his disciple’s expenses (finance is a recurring topic throughout the Drolin letters): money is in shorter supply than ever, since “*a fine house, formerly occupied by nuns in a suburb of Rouen*” has been rented for a novitiate – so Gabriel must not expect to keep “*relying entirely*” for his support on his home base. Nor must he keep on incurring debts: there is nothing his Superior holds “*more in horror*” than debts and Gabriel must cease attempting to pay his way by giving promissory notes and expecting these to be honoured from source. However, a further subsidy of fifty francs will soon be on its way to the impecunious disciple, through the office of the Pope’s treasurer at Avignon. Mention of Avignon prompts John Baptist to add that henceforth letters may be safely transmitted by that route. News is given that openings have been made at Dijon and at Brest, and that there are plans for an establishment at Marseilles. Copies of the school prayer book are going to be forwarded etc.

All these references, and more like them, are to be found in this one letter, and one has to search for anything in the nature of spiritual direction. There is, predictably, a word about trust in Providence, but even this serves only to reinforce the impression of urgency that Gabriel should busy himself more about what he was sent to Rome to do:

*“I know it is better to live independently, even though it is more difficult, and I am glad that you are in these dispositions. But in that case, one*

*must either abandon oneself entirely to providence or, if one has not enough virtue to do so, or insufficient faith, one must take the necessary precautions beforehand; otherwise it is neither wise nor Christian to act thus."*

Even the one brief mention (in this letter) of prayer seems directed to the tasks to be accomplished rather than to Gabriel's sanctification:

*"Pray hard. . . and ask God to conduct our affairs in Rome and elsewhere according to his holy will."*

It is as if the Founder believed that if Gabriel took more seriously the work for which he had been sent to Rome, his spiritual progress would be quite safe. There is, of course, throughout this correspondence an underlying confidence in his disciple's religious quality, a confidence which he voices with emphasis in his letter of 27 April 1705:

*"I know that you are very far from doing what Brother Nicolas did, and that is why I have so completely placed my confidence in you."*

John Baptist knew his man. Vuyart had sadly failed his trust, but Drolin, he was sure, still meant what he said when, fourteen years before this letter, he pronounced the words: *"We bind ourselves by a vow of association and union to effect and maintain the said act of establishment, without power to abandon the task, even should we remain the only three members of the Society, and should be obliged to beg for alms and live on bread only."* That the Saint's confidence was well-placed is convincingly demonstrated by the fact that Gabriel remained faithful to his lonely assignment for twenty-seven years, without sight ever again of his Founder, and without company of confrères until the last few months of his long exile. No doubt his fidelity owed much to the awareness the letters gave him that his Founder and friend was with him in spirit, his companion on the particular and strange journey that Providence had mapped out for him, Gabriel Drolin, in these foundation years of the new work of salvation. The letters he received (and carefully preserved) were often frank in their promptings and advice but it was a frankness allowed by the mutual understanding existing between the Founder and the disciple. Gabriel well knew that John Baptist's concern in everything was that God's will be fulfilled – specifically his will for the mission entrusted to them both. A school in Rome, and a school functioning well, was the objective of that mission in the particular case of Drolin. The element of community life was absent but had not (needless to say)

been intended by the Founder who had sent Gabriel's brother Gerard with him to Rome in the first place; Gerard soon lost courage and returned to France, and although the need to send another companion was a constant preoccupation of John Baptist (the letters prove it) circumstances repeatedly defeated the intention. So Gabriel's community life was found in the letters he received from M. de La Salle. The many items of news they conveyed about the growing Institute are to be read in that light. As Miguel Campos puts it: "Everything was shared – the sorrows but also the joys". And throughout the Drolin letters – and indeed throughout all the others that we have – we are able to note the detail of the Founder's awareness of the development of "God's work", and especially his concern that that development remain true to the line intended for it by Providence. That is why the correspondence is a valuable *parole-force* for a particular stage in the Saint's journey of faith.

## 15

### *Self-Effacement for the Good of the Enterprise*

The final *événement-clef* of those selected by Miguel Campos as crucial stages in the spiritual journey of St. John Baptist de La Salle has reference to the sequence of incidents which led the Founder to leave Paris in 1712 for a long absence in the south of France, whence he returned only in response to a letter from the “principal Brothers” of the Institute. This period of John Baptist’s life is at once enigmatic and revealing. For him, apparently, it was that “dark night of the soul” which, according to the mystical theologians, is the common experience of high holiness. But what was darkness for him is full of enlightenment for us, seeking to observe the ways of God with his faithful servant. In particular it provides a specially revealing occasion to appreciate the phenomenon which is at the heart of the Campos thesis, namely, the inseparability of the Founder’s personal spiritual growth and the development of the work God had called him to accomplish.

The historical facts relating to this period are complex and less than totally clear. The two source-biographers treated them in their own fashion and (notes Rigault) between their interpretations the reader cannot always be sure of the reality. Maillefer had warned his readers in his foreword to his (second) biography that he had felt it “*a duty to suppress information about certain secret intrigues*” out of consideration for the reputation “*of several meritorious persons*” whose views “*which it has not seemed desirable to discuss*” had caused trouble for M. de La Salle. Behind this disclaimer was the fact that some of the “*meritorious persons*” concerned were of Jansenistic persuasion, including some who had appealed against Clement XI’s Bull “*Unigenitus*” which had condemned the sect and which, as it happened, was promulgated on 8 September 1713, chronologically at the half way point of John Baptist’s stay in the South. Maillefer himself was a partisan of the sect and was aware, of course, that John Baptist’s brother, Louis, was a committed “appellant”. Rather than cause even indirect offence to the uncle still living, the Maurist biographer settled for a discreet withholding of details concerning the tribulations of his deceased uncle.

Canon Blain, on the other hand (according to a particularly critical assessment by Georges Rigault) dramatises the events, calling his hero's journey to the South a "*flight*" and then modifying the historical content to suit this interpretation. All the incidents relating to the Founder's period in Provence are presented by Blain (says Rigault) from this point of view: ". . . His portrayal is given in bold colours, without nuance, his personages are fixed in conventional attitudes, and his facts are distorted in order to evoke either compassion or blame. . ." Miguel Campos is less forthright than this in his assessment of Blain's treatment, and even adopts the latter's term "flight" to describe John Baptist's departure from Paris in 1712. But his understanding of the motivation for that departure goes beyond the simplistic reading of Blain and offers an interpretation which seems wholly satisfying, especially when the *événement-clef* of which the "flight" was the historical core is reflected upon in the light of the *parole-force* chosen by Campos for the purpose.

But in order to set the situation in context it is necessary to sketch the sequence of events which led to what seemed to be a self-imposed exile from the administrative centre of the Society, namely Paris. Campos begins such a sketch with a reminder of the litigation to which the Founder was subjected at the hands of the writing-masters and the masters of the so-called Little Schools. This is an area of the Saint's life which awaits a monographic study as a contribution to the definitive biography towards which the vigorous scholarship at work in the Institute during the last three decades has been leading. The source-biographers raise more questions than they answer in their accounts of this series of legal actions. Documents uncarthed by later researchers, notably Lucard, Ravelet and Guibert, have made it possible to answer some of these questions and to fill out the historical content, and Rigault's discussion of the issues involved has the quality of critical insight so often noticeable throughout the first volume of his *Histoire Générale*. But one is still left wondering about the state of the French judiciary at that time which made it possible for a man of De La Salle's patent goodness and beneficence to suffer incessant persecution, in the name of the law, during some dozen years.

A chronological summary (based on present knowledge) of this sustained onslaught must suffice here, since litigation was not the only weapon employed by the opponents of M. de La Salle and the

work he had established. The first attack occurred in 1690 when the second school to be opened in Paris, the one in the rue du Bac, was pillaged within less than a year of its foundation. Blain and Maillefer mention no other lawsuit until 1699, but later research discovered a letter of Madame de Maintenon, written in 1698 to the President of the Paris regional *parlement* on behalf of the Founder's schools, from which it is fair to deduce that other attacks had been launched during that interval. The 1699 case – another violent ransacking, this time of the school in the rue Saint-Placide – resulted in the closure of that establishment for three months. From 1704 the frequency of the lawsuits and condemnations reached a crisis level, following one another with a do-or-die determination to stop the Christian Schools' challenge to the survival of the fee-paying establishments: the relevant dates are summarised by Campos as 1 February, 22 February, 30 May, 11 July and 29 August all in 1704, then 5 February 1706.

The parish priest of Saint-Sulpice, Joachim de La Chétardye, could effectively have shielded John Baptist from these attacks but, as we saw in Chapter 12, the estrangement of La Chétardye had by this time reached a point when John Baptist had felt obliged, for the sake of peace, to betake himself and his novices to a residence outside the Saint-Sulpice confines. La Chétardye, in fact, maintained a passive attitude in face of the lawsuits, even though these threatened the work of the free schools within his own parish. Two years after the 1704 barrage, the Brothers labouring in the Saint-Sulpice schools, exasperated beyond endurance by the harassment of the schoolmasters, prevailed upon M. de La Salle to withdraw them from the parish. The closure took place in July 1706, and Blain describes the bewilderment and anger of the parents, whose protestations, when they realised what had happened, forced the curé to beg John Baptist (now with the novices in what Blain calls “*a kind of exile*” in Rouen) to re-open the schools. The Founder, unconcerned to score off his enemy by refusing the request, but conscious, rather, of the needs of the Paris poor, and still convinced of the advantage for the future of the Society to have a base in the capital, agreed. But he asked for a guarantee that the Brothers would be able to carry out their work without further harassment. Significantly, La Chétardye was able to give this guarantee and to ensure that it was honoured, and we hear no more of the hostile irruptions of the school-master corporations.

The severity of the winter of 1708-9 caused a food shortage which obliged John Baptist to bring the novices back from Rouen to Paris. A suitably spacious house had earlier been acquired (through the good business skills of the bursar, Br. Thomas Frappet) in the rue de la Barouillère. The Founder, thinking and acting positively, as he had done throughout the difficulties he had met in Paris, had wanted the Brothers working in the Saint-Sulpice schools to have more comfortable and salubrious accommodation than the dingy residence attached to the rue Princesse school, where they had been from the beginning. It was to this property in the rue de la Barouillère that John Baptist now brought the novices.

The move was imposed upon him by the incidence of famine, but it did something to ease his concern for centralisation and unity. The fear of fragmentation was an ever-present preoccupation at this time, arising from the fact that he had felt obliged to respond to as many as possible of the requests for new openings, a number of these in distant towns. His experience of the proprietorial attitudes of the successive parish priests of Saint-Sulpice, especially of M. de La Chétardye, had made him sensitive to this danger. Fidelity to the providential plan for the enterprise of the Christian Schools seemed particularly threatened at this period when John Baptist was approaching his sixtieth year and was, no doubt, increasingly conscious that time was running out for his personal oversight of the work God had called him to accomplish. Even had the fortuitous need created by the famine not occurred, the urge to return to the centre of things in Paris cannot have been far from the Founder's mind. Such a move, he was well aware, involved a return to the tension-fraught relationship with the parish priest of Saint-Sulpice which had driven him first to seek a kind of refuge at the rue de Charonne in another parish of the capital, and then to go further afield to Rouen. But personal feelings were not to be allowed to impede what he was convinced was God's will at this particular juncture. He forthwith took up residence (accompanied by his novices) with the Saint-Sulpice Brothers at the rue de la Barouillère in July 1709.

It was a more critical moment in his personal spiritual itinerary than he knew. It was one thing to have assembled the Brothers of the Saint-Sulpice schools and the novices in a single residence, under his own direction, but another to re-create the unity of mind and heart which had prevailed in the early days at Rheims and which the

Saint knew to be the first and indispensable condition of future success for the Congregation. The divisive influence of the years in the Saint-Sulpice schools, under the supervision of the possessive M. de La Chétardye, and the concomitant psychological, and even physical, exclusion of M. de La Salle, had wrought a damaging effect on some of the Brothers who now showed resentment at the Founder's new arrangements at the rue de la Barouillère. As described by Maillefer: "*Some Brothers among those who had been left to conduct the schools in Paris had lost their spirit of obedience in the absence of M. de La Salle. He sought to bring them back to the practice of the Rule but they, with perverse disregard for his authority, set themselves up in opposition to him, refused him their obedience and complained strongly against the severity of the rules he wished them to observe. . .*"

This was a new test of John Baptist's trust in God, and one perhaps more severe than any that had gone before. Individual defections had been a recurrent trial from the beginning, the most wounding that, four years previously, of Nicolas Vuyart. But the Founder had learned to cope with such disappointments because he had found that God made good such losses by calling others to fill the vacant places. His faith had also been well able to sustain the sequence of trials which had been his experience since he had committed himself to the service of the poor – the alienation of many of his relatives and friends, the hostility of M. de La Chétardye, the attempt to displace him as Superior on the ground that he was incompetent, the harassment by the schoolmasters, and the rest. His profound relationship with God had long enabled him to understand that suffering was inseparable from participation in Christ's redemptive work – which the establishing of the enterprise of the Christian Schools most assuredly was.

But the new situation now confronting him at the rue de la Barouillère was in a different category from what had gone before. If Maillefer has accurately conveyed the historical reality, John Baptist now found himself opposed from within the community by a considerable proportion of its members – who, apparently, were not proposing to withdraw from the Society but to give it a different character. The autonomy which the Founder had striven to defend against interference from outsiders was now threatened by a polarisation of views within. The formula of vows had established the principle that it was "*together and by association*" that the work of the schools could be accomplished and, thereby, God's glory

procured. The schism within the Paris community now threatened to make a dead letter of this principle and thereby bring about the failure of the whole undertaking.

According to Blain, the personal animosity shown him by Joachim de La Chétardye (a zealous pastor, esteemed by all who knew him) had first caused John Baptist to entertain doubts about his own role in the work he had thus far been convinced God had given him to do. In the first place these doubts had taken the form of self-questionings as to whether the hostility directed against himself and his disciples in Paris was not the result of the provocative nature of his own temperament and procedures. It was in this state of mind that he decided to put his doubts, so to speak, to a test, by betaking himself to the Carmelite friary in Paris where he spent a fortnight in prayer and reflection, his whereabouts known only to two or three of his disciples. He had begun to see himself, says Blain with characteristic imagery, "*as a Jonah who had to be thrown into the sea*", and by this temporary withdrawal to the Carmelite house he was testing "*whether the tempest would abate*" in his absence.

The experiment served to strengthen his doubts. La Chétardye, under the impression, it seems, that the Founder had left Paris, showed a new cordiality to the community in his absence which contrasted only too sharply with his renewed coldness when John Baptist returned. The latter's self-questionings persisted and took on subtly disturbing modulations as his adversities continued. With the declared opposition of a clique of his own disciples, his doubts began to coalesce into a pervading darkness in which he was no longer able to discern with confidence the way God wished him to go. As Campos says, the impression John Baptist had that his disciples were rejecting him began to equate itself in his mind with a rejection by God. The seeming impossibility for the enterprise to move forward unchecked created in him a doubt as to the authenticity of what he had hitherto been sure was his vocation.

According to Blain, it was the turmoil of yet another entanglement with a lawsuit which finally decided the Founder to yield to circumstances and leave the capital. The story of the Clément affair is sufficiently well known to readers of the Saint's life not to need detailing here. John Baptist chose not to appear as defendant in court, preferring simply to entrust to "*certain persons of standing and authority*" (Blain's phrase) a memoir presenting his side of the case, together with thirteen letters he had received from the Abbé

Clément – these constituting sufficient evidence that the initiative for the founding of the teacher training college at Saint-Denis had come from the Abbé and not from himself. Blain says that the lawyers to whom these trusted persons submitted the dossier happened to be sympathetic to the Jansenistic faction and merely used the documents to reinforce the case against M. de La Salle.

Blain's version of the Clément affair, in fact, suggests that the eventual condemnation of the Founder was the effect of hostile forces determined to get him out of Paris. The thinly-disguised figure of M. de La Chétardye hovers in the background throughout the unhappy story. He, says Blain, *“had long wanted to see M. de La Salle far from Paris in order to profit by his absence to take over the direction of the Brothers in the capital”*. The biographer goes on to say that only M. de La Salle's virtue enabled him to bear with patience the suffering caused by this new trial which he accepted *“like holy Job, as coming from the hand of God . . . Neither complaint nor murmur escaped him against so many people who seemed to have made a pact to oppress him. Silence and patience were the only weapons he employed against the bad faith of the Abbé, the fury of the latter's father, the injustice of the sentence pronounced against him, the malevolence of the lawyers in the case, the indolence of those persons who should have come to his defence, the treachery of one who had been his friend (Louis Rogier) . . . Thus, finding himself in enemy territory in Paris, surrounded by persecutors known or unknown, with friends who were either indifferent to his lot or even treacherous, where he could trust no one and where he could not even be sure of his personal safety, he left the capital in the first week of Lent, to escape the worst excesses of the persecution, bearing in mind the words of Jesus Christ: ‘When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next . . .’ He went into hiding in remote Provence, with the intention of not reappearing in Paris until he could do so with safety, that is, until his secret and ruthless persecutor, the instigator of it all, was no longer in a position to harm him.”*

The passage is typical Blain, the historical content of the information just managing to emerge from the misty hagiography which threatens to conceal it, the essential truth of the interpretation endangered by the bland partiality of the biographer's stance. Miguel Campos corrects the historical perspective by noting that the Founder's refusal to fight the Clément charges in court was due to his awareness that, in strictly legal terms, he had no chance of succeeding. The establishment of the teachers' training seminary at Saint-Denis had cut clean across a formal order of the Paris *parlement*,

dated 5 February 1706, that “*the said De La Salle must furthermore establish no community under the name of seminary for teachers of Little Schools*”. His having advanced, in simple trust, a first instalment of 5,200 livres on the property of Mlle. Poignant was evidence of his part in this, and his case would not have been helped by the fact that he had personally kept himself in the background by asking Louis Rogier to act on his behalf. Moreover, the whole project was dependent upon a promise by the young Abbé Clément not only to reimburse John Baptist’s advance of 5,200 livres, but to pay off the total cost of the Saint-Denis property. As Clément was under the age of twenty-five, and therefore unqualified to enter into a legal contract, a prosecuting counsel would have had little difficulty in establishing M. de La Salle’s procedures as a case of “suborning a minor”.

Sentence was pronounced against him, in his absence, on 31 May 1712 – an example, surely, of the way the law of a country, designed to ensure justice for its citizens, can sometimes succeed only in inflicting a moral injustice. John Baptist had acted in good faith throughout. His wish to provide training for country schoolmasters had never deserted him, even though he had seen two earlier undertakings of the kind come to nothing. When the Abbé Clément made his proposal to establish a training college at Saint-Denis, a few miles outside Paris, the Saint had seen this as a providential opportunity to try again. The court order forbidding him to make any such foundation was an injustice sustained in the course of the campaign waged against him by the schoolmaster syndicates. In the sight of God this did not bind his conscience; nor had he seen Clément’s promise to finance the Saint-Denis undertaking as anything other than the generous wish of a zealous young priest to further the work of Christian education. But, without the support of his parish priest or of the Archbishop of Paris, Cardinal de Noailles, whose Jansenistic leanings set him at variance with the uncompromising adherent of Rome that John Baptist was known to be, he would make little headway in court with the moral defence on which alone he could build his case. So he departed for the South of France where, by this time, his disciples were conducting schools in eight towns.

Brother Clair Battersby provides a sufficiently lucid account of the subsequent events in Chapter XX of his 1957 biography of the Founder, the chapter headed “Tour of the South”. Miguel Campos

delays less over the historical detail of this complex period in John Baptist's life than to consider its meaning for the Saint's spiritual itinerary – though, of course, as throughout the thesis, the latter is shown to be related to, and conditioned by, the former. What is to be noted in the first place is that, even if Blain has used the right word in describing this journey to the South as a “flight”, the Founder's purpose still remained firm for the consolidation of the work he had been given to do. Doubts as to his continued usefulness to the Society were ever present to his mind, and the disaster of the Clément business had only served to intensify them – not least because he felt he had blundered in reading the abbé's apparently good intentions as a providential sign. But the account of his visits to the Brothers' communities at Avignon, Alès, Les Vans, Mende and Marseilles shows his concern for the well-being of the schools there and also the consolation he gained from the marks of esteem for the Brothers by the church and civic authorities. His visit to Marseilles afforded the greatest comfort of all in that it culminated in the establishment of a novitiate there.

But it was, in fact, the subsequent events in Marseilles which triggered a fresh onset of self-doubt. The local support which had made the Brothers' work in Marseilles a flourishing success was provided by patrons sympathetic to Jansenism, and when the Founder's opposition to the sect became known there, the support turned to hostility and the work suffered a disastrous decline. According to Blain, this was the occasion chosen by certain Brothers to tell their Founder that he had evidently come South to demolish rather than to build. As in Paris, so now in Marseilles, John Baptist became convinced that his continued presence would only do harm and he withdrew, this time not to visit other communities but to find relief in prayer at the monastery of Saint-Maximin, some thirty miles north-east of Marseilles.

Miguel Campos stresses that the doubts now nearing certainty in the Founder's mind were not purely an effect of subjective illusion. The criticisms which he had experienced from the beginning in Paris had centred on his fitness to govern the Society he had founded. True, his disciples had firmly registered their confidence in him when his opponents had succeeded in getting him replaced by an ecclesiastical superior, but his own fundamental attitude of respect for authority – his innate tendency to equate the wish of a superior, in that case the Archbishop of Paris, with the will of God – had

raised the first question mark in his mind. Perhaps God had called him to establish the Community but not necessarily to conduct its development beyond a certain point? Much that had happened since then had seemed to reinforce the validity of this question. Perhaps it was God who wanted him out of the way of the Institute's development and was only using the machinations of hostile forces to bring about this object? Perhaps, even, the whole enterprise was a product not of God's will but of his own ambition? Such questions as these, it may be fairly surmised, occupied John Baptist's mind in the prayerful solitude of Saint-Maximin.

At this time, according to Blain, the Founder was persistently drawn to the idea of seeking parish work, with a special apostolate for the conversion of sinners (a charism which, according to examples quoted by the biographers, he possessed in a high degree). Campos sets this statement of Blain's in the context of his "itinerary" theme. At this late stage in his journey John Baptist, now aged sixty-two, found himself at yet another junction of roads at which he must make a choice. Campos believes that we must give full weight to the biographer's assurance that the idea of a new form of apostolate was now presenting itself as a serious possibility. Maillefer, for his part, indicates another option that beckoned at this time, namely to remain in seclusion at Saint-Maximin and "*end his days there, unknown to anyone*" – a solution to his perplexity which we may well believe he found strongly attractive. Objectively speaking, these two alternative routes, either of which would have diverted him completely from the one he had so far travelled, were potential ways of adhering to God's will. Neither was an option of despair, nor even of wavering faith. It was only his determination to follow God's will that had brought him to where he was. If it was now God's will to take him along a new route, then he would unhesitatingly follow. His purpose, says Campos, was not at all to make a prophet-like judgment on the Brothers who had turned against him, nor even on those outside the Community who had challenged the way the enterprise of the Christian Schools had developed and the structures he had given it. His withdrawal expressed only a profound doubt about the validity of his own role in that enterprise.

Campos refers to a passage of Blain's at this point in the biography reporting a sense of guilt which pre-occupied John Baptist at this time: "*Bereft of all consolation, the holy priest blamed his own sins, believing that they alone were the cause of the twofold persecution he now*

*suffered, one at the hands of God, the other at the hands of men . . .*” This sense of guilt would have been much more than a manifestation of the deep humility which the years had developed in his soul. It would have arisen from an acute consciousness of the religious significance of the undertaking which he believed God had entrusted to him. The contrast between the demands of that undertaking, considered as a part of the history of salvation, and the sense of his own inadequacy for the task, filled him now with a sharpened sense of the nature of sin, specifically his own. A sentence of St. John of the Cross seems not too wide of the mark to describe the Founder’s state of mind at this time: “The greatest affliction of the sorrowful soul in the state of the dark night is to be convinced beyond all doubt that God has abandoned it, that He has cast it away into the darkness as an abominable thing”. Certainly everything that had happened to him seemed now to tell him that God no longer wanted him with the Brothers.

As for the Brothers, the biographers tell a story of bewilderment and disarray. In Paris, by a kind of unspoken consensus among a majority, Brother Barthélemy had assumed responsibility for the day to day business of the Community, but he had no mandate from the Founder and his assumption of the role was not to the liking of all. Those who disapproved feared that he would be too pliant in the hands of M. de La Salle’s enemies. He did, in fact, evince either excessive trustfulness or sheer weakness in agreeing to a suggestion that he should write to some of the communities proposing that they might invite a local ecclesiastic to assume direction of their affairs. Blain assures us that in doing this Barthélemy was motivated by pure charity. The Founder seemed to have abandoned the Institute to its own resources: correspondence with him was at a standstill, either because letters were not reaching him or because, as the majority of the Brothers now feared, he preferred to leave them unanswered. Barthélemy, conscious of the heavy responsibilities weighing upon him, acted upon what seemed to him well-meant advice to save the Society from collapse. But his action served to drive out of the Institute men who saw that his procedure was only a step in the direction precisely of collapse.

Blain says that the Founder’s reason for leaving unanswered any letters that reached him was that “*he wished to induce the Brothers to forget him completely*”. Campos considers that this assessment by the biographer is well-judged, that it accurately reflects John Baptist’s

belief at this moment that he was no longer needed by, or useful to, the Society. All he could do for it now was to leave it free to work out its own future. As we have seen, the conviction that he must eventually be displaced as Superior by one of the Brothers had been with him for many years – from at least as far back as 1686 when, at the rue Neuve, he had persuaded the Community to elect Henri L'Heureux in his place. That had been a short-lived arrangement, and when he had tried again eight years later at Vaugirard, the Brothers had stood firm against his insistence that they should elect one of themselves to take his place. By his self-deprivation now of that communion which his faith in God and his trust in them had built, he may have felt that he was placing the ultimate pressure on them to take the future of “God’s work” into their own hands.

The narrative of the events shows, however, that if he considered that his place was no longer at the centre of things in Paris, he did not equate this with having nothing more to do with the Society at all. His enemies in the capital had already put it about that he had abandoned the Brothers, but this was an accusation prompted by wishful thinking rather than by genuine conviction. To have yielded to his inclination to stay in the solitude of Saint-Maximin or to take up parochial work would have been to pre-empt the orders of Providence. He was still seeking light in his darkness, still awaiting a sign which, like the many signs he had so far followed in his journey of faith, would convince him of what God wanted him to do.

This was why, upon leaving Saint-Maximin in June 1713 he went directly to the community established six years before at Mende, where he had learned that serious irregularity had developed. He needed no special sign for this. The offence to God and the possible scandal to parents and pupils represented by a community whose Director had abdicated his post had to be rectified. He was coldly received by the discontented community and, according to Blain, was obliged, after a few days, to seek accommodation in the neighbouring Capuchin friary. But he remained in the town some two months, and succeeded by patience and tact in finally restoring order in the community.

The Mende episode is significant at this stage of our study of John Baptist’s sustained response to what he believed was God’s will for him. It shows that, even if he had become convinced that God no longer wanted him to carry the burden of responsibility for the future of the Society, nevertheless he knew that it could not be

reconcilable with the divine will to be indifferent to its fortunes as revealed in the daily events occurring in his vicinity. What was developing in his mind, suggests Campos, was a consciousness of a new role for him in the Society. When he left Mende, it was to go to Grenoble, not this time to bring tranquillity to a restless community but to share the peace and companionship of the small group of Brothers who gave him welcome there. The impression one derives from the biographers is that this stay at Grenoble provided a kind of a halting-place in his itinerary, and that the new role he gladly assumed was that of a simple member of one of the several communities which had sprung into being under his charismatic leadership. It was here, as Blain tells us, that he once again took his place in class and taught the children who frequented the school. But the occasion for this act of participation in his disciples' daily work symbolised, in fact, the ambivalence of his situation at this time. God had not yet given him the sign that he was no longer to act as Superior. Whatever his growing conviction, the present fact was that, in the sight of God, the only Superior of the Institute was himself, since, despite all his efforts to the contrary, he had been chosen as such by his disciples. Any idea of returning to Paris to impose his authority had by now been ruled out. Yet his conscience told him that he should at least know how the situation had evolved in the capital during the year and half since he had left there. His compromise solution was to send a Brother from the Grenoble community to carry out a visit on his behalf, and to take that Brother's place in class.

His continuing state of doubt at this time was also indicated by his decision to visit the Parmenie recluse Sister Louise, to seek the benefit of her famed gift of discernment.\* Her assurance that his developing wish to spend the rest of his days in solitude was not in accordance with God's will served to confirm his own intuition but not to convince him that his place was back in the capital actively at the head of the Society. He returned to the haven of the Grenoble community to resume the archetypal way of life, comprising prayer and work and fraternal union, envisaged by him from the beginning as the ideal of every Brother of the Christian Schools. It was for God to intervene in his own good time, when and if the respite should end.

\*An absorbing account of this episode is to be found in *Encounters: De La Salle at Parmenie* by Leo Burkhard FSC & Luke Salm FSC (Romeoville, 1982).

## 16

### *Light out of Darkness*

The divine intervention came in the form of a letter, dated 1 April 1714, addressed to the Founder by the assembled Brothers of Paris, Saint-Denis and Versailles. It was a remarkable document about which Michel Sauvage has said that “it would be difficult to discover a more convincing proof of the solidarity of the Society established by M. de La Salle, or of the Brothers’ consciousness of being an autonomous Community”. The incident that had brought them to the point of writing their letter was a step taken by the cleric, a M. de Brou, whom M. de La Chétardye had asked to act as Superior of the Saint-Sulpice community. De Brou, prompted by the parish priest, had drawn up a set of regulations for the Brothers, quite different from the rules already formulated by their Founder, and had submitted these to the Cardinal Archbishop for his approval. It was a move which united the Brothers in an alarmed awareness of the threat to their existence as a Society such as they knew their absent leader had intended it to be. They took the only step available to them: they “ordered” M. de La Salle, in the name of the vow of obedience which he had pronounced with them, to return to Paris and resume direction of the society.

For John Baptist it was the sign he had awaited. The request of “*the principal Brothers of the Christian Schools*” (thus the writers of the letter termed themselves), gathered together as forming “*the body of the Society*”, was an unmistakable expression of God’s will. Not to have obeyed this request would have been to default on his vow and therefore to have refused the divine purpose. But his response transcended a mere material act of obedience. As Miguel Campos points out, Blain remains at the mere surface of the Founder’s reaction to the letter when he says that, “*having inculcated the virtue of obedience in his disciples so often by word, he felt it was only right that he should now provide a lesson by his example*”. Obedience certainly entered into his motivation and indeed it was the direct appeal to his obedience contained in the letter’s words, “. . .and we command you in the name of the body of this Society to which you have vowed obedience. . .”, which left him no room for doubt as to where God’s

will lay. But the experience of his two years away from the capital, the deepening of his understanding which his intensive prayer and meditation had wrought, made him sure of how he must read the letter's injunction that he was to "*resume forthwith the general conduct of affairs*". The writers of the letter no doubt meant that he must take up again the reins of government from where he had left off. They could not know that the experience he had been through during the two years since they had last seen him moved him to a different understanding of their words.

The letter from Paris provided light in his darkness, not only because it invoked his obedience to "*the body of the Society*" but also, and by that very fact, because it demonstrated for him that the Society was now, at last, capable of taking its destiny into its own hands. It told him that the autonomy he had defended at the cost of being thought stubborn and inflexible (by men whose minds and characters he respected) was now secure and needed his protection no longer. It told him that, by wording their request to him – their Founder to whom, at every stage of their spiritual journey together, they had looked for guidance – as a command, the "*principal Brothers*" had understood what the term "*the body of the Society*" meant and its significance for the future. Without, surely, adverting to the fact themselves, their request served only to convince their Founder that his role as Superior had now become redundant – and also (fulfilling his persistent dream!) that the Society would never have another priest as its Superior, but only and exclusively one of its own members.

If we bear these considerations in mind, the remaining sequence of events will not seem as surprising as perhaps they have tended to in the past. For example, Battersby, in his valuable 1957 biography, having commented that the Founder left Grenoble "without further hesitation", goes on to say that "instead of arriving in Paris within a week or so, as he might easily have done, took four months to get there, and this provides us with yet another of those problems with which this period is full". But the fact was that now John Baptist felt no urgency about his response to the Brothers' summons. His prolonged absence from the capital had brought about the very thing he had hoped for: a further delay could only serve to consolidate the Brothers' awareness that the Society's future was now, under God's providence, in their own hands.

It happened also that the incident which had alerted the Brothers

into writing their letter had proved to be a false alarm. The Cardinal's response to M. de Brou's request for approval of the Community's new regulations was that he deemed it "*inappropriate for any decision to be taken relating to changes in the existing rule*". The date of this communication was 4 April 1714, and no doubt John Baptist would have had word of it a few days after receiving the Brothers' letter written just three days before. The news would have seemed a providential intervention, allowing more time for his return to Paris.

The biographers say that after leaving Grenoble he travelled north to Dijon, but broke his journey at Lyons in order to visit the tomb of St. Francis de Sales (in fulfilment of a promise made to the Visitation nuns at Grenoble). He stayed some little while with the Brothers at Dijon, where a school had been founded nine years before, but then, instead of pressing on to Paris (he was about half-way there from Grenoble) he retraced his steps and revisited other communities in the south. No doubt he had a premonition that he would not see these communities again, not only because he sensed he had not many more years to live, but also because he foresaw that future "visitations" of these places would be the responsibility of others.

It is true that there was one further consideration which surely helped to make his return to Paris a leisurely affair. The old enemy, M. de La Chétardye, was still in possession at Saint-Sulpice. John Baptist had no reason to believe that the attitude of the redoubtable parish priest had changed, and he was in no disposition to return and resume the battle which, in essence, had been the cause of his departure from the capital two years before. More than ever, since receiving the letter of 1 April, he was confident that the Brothers could defend their autonomy even against any further encroachments by La Chétardye himself. He wished neither to renew trouble for them by returning now, nor to seem to have triumphed over his opponent by responding to a vote of total confidence on the part of his disciples.

But on 29 June of that same year, M. de La Chétardye died, aged 78, "*in the odour of sanctity*" as Brother Barthélemy said, without a trace of irony, in a letter he had occasion to write to the parish priest of Mende, who presumably conveyed the news to John Baptist. As Georges Rigault comments, the conventional term "in the odour of sanctity" was not wholly misplaced. La Chétardye had been an esteemed priest to whose "*virtues and saintly labours*" the reigning

Pope Clement XI paid personal tribute, and whose eighteen years of zealous ministrations to the people of Saint-Sulpice were recognised by all who had known him there. But his death removed the one great obstacle to the free development of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, and it is significant that within three weeks of learning the news, the Founder arrived back in Paris, 10 August 1714.

According to Blain, reporting no doubt from a reminiscence of one who was present, John Baptist's first words to the welcoming Brothers were, "*Here I am. What do you want me to do?*" He spoke, from the moment of reunion with them, as one who had no further role but to be under obedience to "*the body of the Society*". His concern was to deflect attention from himself and to concentrate the efforts of the Brothers on securing the future of the enterprise of the Christian Schools. They engaged his obedience to accept once again the title and duties of Superior, but he associated Barthélemy with him in all that he did, leaving the day to day administration to him, advising when asked, but otherwise limiting his activity to that of chaplain and spending much of his time composing or revising works for the spiritual and professional use of the Brothers. He did exercise his authority to transfer the novitiate back to Saint-Yon in October 1715 and took up residence there himself a month later. But his tendency throughout this period was to efface himself, to prepare the Brothers for the day when death would remove him definitively from them.

Once the transfer to Rouen was complete, he again used his authority to set in motion arrangements for a general assembly of the Brothers with the purpose, above all, of ensuring the election of one of them as Superior. But even in this he avoided any semblance of autocratic procedure. He assembled a group of the Brothers of the Rouen area and deliberated procedure with them. The result was a formal document, signed by each of the Brothers present (John Baptist adding simply "*I am in agreement with what the Brothers have herein decided. De La Salle*") appointing Brother Barthélemy to visit all the twenty-two existing communities throughout the realm (a round journey of some 1800 miles, begun in mid-December) to secure their agreement for the holding of a general assembly at Saint-Yon the following spring. This agreement was expressed by the signatures of the Brothers constituting the twenty-two communities

(exactly 100, not including some 18 novices)\* to a formula assenting to the holding of “*an assembly of the principal Brothers of our Institute in the said house of Saint-Yon, at the time indicated by our Brother Barthélemy, in order to determine and finalise our rules and at the same time to make provision for the government of our Institute . . .*” The booklet containing the twenty-two signed statements is preserved in the Rome archives.

The gathering took place in May 1717 and Brother Barthélemy, Joseph Truffet, was elected Superior. The Founder himself took no official part in the proceedings and did not sign any of the acts of the assembly, nor even the formula of vows when a renovation of them took place during the meeting. (He did, however, sign the formula when the renovation took place the following year and the attestation of the act describes him there as “*priest, founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, serving the chapel of the said house of Saint-Yon*”.) By remaining apart now from the formal administrative tasks, he was underlining the lay character of the Society and its government from within by consecrated laymen freely elected. The attempts of his opponents to decentralise the administration had foundered; their total result had been to strengthen the bonds that held the Brothers together in that unity they had discovered in their personal spiritual journey made in company with him who, under God’s guidance, had given their Society its unique character. And, observes Miguel Campos, the self-effacement of M. de La Salle, the obligation he had imposed upon his disciples to do without him for an extended period, had certainly contributed greatly to the solidarity which found its expression in the 1717 general chapter at Saint-Yon.

Acting further as a self-contained legislative body, the capitulants entrusted to the Founder the task of making a definitive revision of the Rules. There is evidence in that revision to show how the Saint’s understanding of his mission had developed since the first draft of the Rules was drawn up in 1705. Miguel Campos treats this evidence as a supplementary *parole-force* for this closing stage of John Baptist’s faith-journey and a consideration of his treatment, following his discussion of the principal relevant *parole-force*, the Brothers’ letter of

\*And not including Gabriel Drolin. We know from a subsequent letter of Barthélemy to Gabriel that the Founder wrote personally to the latter to obtain his agreement to the decisions of the general assembly, but the letter seemingly failed to reach Drolin.

1 April 1714, will form the subject matter of our next and final chapter.

Seeking still to be as non-existent as possible to the Brothers, the Founder obtained Barthélemy's approval to make an extended stay at the Paris seminary of Saint-Nicolas du Chardonnet, returning only after five months and at the insistence of the Saint-Yon community. No doubt the latter were unable to treat him other than as if he were still their Superior and this he now abhorred. His disposition of total kenosis (the term used by Campos) is well illustrated by a letter he wrote from the seminary to Brother Barthélemy apropos the purchase of the Saint-Yon property (hitherto held only on lease). One can discern from the letter that John Baptist considered the opportunity of purchase not one to be missed, but at the same time he declined to give advice (which of course Barthélemy had requested) that could be construed as direction: *"I am unable to give you advice on the subject, and you should consult more enlightened persons, for it is a matter of importance. Think the thing over carefully, since it is not yet settled. I should not advise you to borrow money for the purchase. On the other hand I do not say outright that it must not be done; you can consult others on this point. I esteem that whatever you decide in the matter will be all right. It is not becoming that I should have any share in these deliberations, for I am nothing, whereas you, as Superior, are the master"*.

The original manuscript of this letter is in the Institute archives, but Blain quotes others of this period, of which the originals have not come down to us. Miguel Campos cites passages from these which reveal the same insistent tendency to self-effacement. Blain, in fact, introduces his references to these letters with the remark that the nearer M. de La Salle felt himself approaching the end of his life, the more he strove *"to die to everything and to efface himself from the minds of everyone, even of his dearest disciples"*. To one of these latter, a senior member of the Society whose request for advice he had not felt able to ignore, he added in his reply: *"I beg you for the love of God, my dear Brother, that for the future you think no more about consulting me on anything. You have your superiors whom you must consult on matters spiritual and temporal. For myself there is nothing now but to prepare myself for death which must soon make my final separation from all creatures."* And in another letter quoted by Blain and written at this time to a correspondent not belonging to the Institute, he remarked: *"Allow me to say, Sir, that you have apparently been misinformed by whoever told you that I was doing good in the Church and*

*providing schoolmasters for towns and villages to instruct the young. It is true that I began the work of training Brothers to conduct free schools, but for a long time now I have had no part in their direction. It is one of themselves, a Brother Barthélemy, who directs them at present and who resides in this house, and whom the Brothers, including those at Saint Denis, recognise as their Superior.”*

Bearing in mind the total reduction of his sense of usefulness to the Institute, we can understand better the tranquillity with which he received the news, on his death-bed, that the Archbishop of Rouen had withdrawn his authorisation to act as chaplain for the community. Canon Blain, who was personally involved in the episode as the one to whom fell the task of conveying the Archbishop's decision to John Baptist, assures us that he listened “*without losing peace or calm, reflecting only cheerful contentment, showing no least sign of annoyance or resentment*”. Coming at the end of a long process of self-annihilation, such a decision could only seem to the Founder a logical endorsement of his own conviction: so unnecessary was he now to the survival of the Institute that even his role of chaplain could be dispensed with. Any sense of personal insult did not enter into his reaction at all. His faith-journey had taken him long past the point at which any personal injustice could wound him, least of all an injustice inflicted by a prelate who had never shown him much sympathy.

All that mattered now to the dying Saint was the future of the work which God had given him to initiate. And the assurance that his intimate converse with his Lord gave him was that the work *would* endure because, as he had so often told his disciples, it was “God's work”. He could die in profound peace (and with what symbolic appropriateness!) on Good Friday, 7 April 1719, endorsing every step that Providence had led him to take in his life's long and arduous pilgrimage, with his last words: “*Yes, I adore God in everything He has willed for me*”.

“Monsieur Notre Très Cher Père ”

Miguel Campos's choice of the principal *parole-force* for these final stages of the Founder's gospel-inspired itinerary is momentarily surprising because it is the only one selected by our guide which is not a writing of the Saint himself. It is, in fact, the letter sent to him by the group of "principal Brothers" assembled in Paris, requesting and requiring him to resume direction of the Society. Campos ranks this letter with the autobiographical documents chosen by him as *paroles-force* in the course of his study because, no less than they, the letter reflected John Baptist's discernment of God's will at a crucial moment in his journey of faith, a moment when he was at a parting of the ways and was awaiting the sign which would show him the way he must choose. It did so because the very wording of it spoke to him at the deepest level of his religious experience. Beginning with a form of address in which respect and affection were combined: "Monsieur notre très cher Père . . ." the letter continued (as translated by Battersby in his 1957 biography):

*"We, the principal Brothers of the Christian Schools, having in view the greater glory of God, the good of the Church and that of our Society, consider that it is of the utmost importance that you should resume the conduct of God's holy work, which is also your own, since it has pleased the Lord to make use of you to establish it and guide it for so long a time. We are all convinced that God has given you the necessary graces and talents for the proper government of this new Society, which is of such great utility in the Church, and we acknowledge in all justice that you have in fact always guided it with much success and edification. For this reason we humbly beseech you, and we command you in the name of the body of this Society to which you have vowed obedience, to resume forthwith the general conduct of affairs. In testimony of which, we have signed. Done at Paris this 1st April 1714. We are, with the most profound respect, dear Father, your very humble and very obedient inferiors. . ."*

To be noted, in the first place, about this document (says Campos) is that it both recapitulates the Founder's association with the Society from the beginning and testifies to the contract entered into by the vows of 1694, whereby the Society had taken definitive shape

as an alliance of men binding themselves in the sight of God to conduct “*together and by association*” free schools for the poor. These vows had given direction to John Baptist’s fulfilment of his mission as founder: they were the point of convergence for his procedures previous to their pronouncement and they constituted the driving force for every subsequent act. The changes in the course of his early life, which retrospectively he had understood to be interventions of Providence, had all been firmly accepted by him because they corresponded to the demands of discipleship of Christ as he read them in the gospel pages. God had led him, step by step, to the point at which he left his family home, renounced his canonry and the ecclesiastical career it promised, and gave away his personal wealth to the poor – all to bind himself in an irrevocable union with others who had met him on his journey of faith and had decided to take up the same journey in his company, their hearts burning within them, like the Emmaus disciples of Jesus, as he progressively revealed to them the meaning of what God had called him and them to accomplish “*together and by association*”.

The letter recalled all this with its reminder that it had “*pleas’d the Lord to make use of (him) to establish and guide (the enterprise of the Christian Schools) for so long a time*”. The words were evocative of the Memoir which he had written to explain the ways whereby divine Providence had brought the Institute into existence. As we saw in Miguel Campos’s analysis of that Memoir, John Baptist had realised that God had led him “*in a quite imperceptible way, and with plenty of time*” to accept responsibility for the schoolmasters – a responsibility definitively assumed by the “exodus” with his few companions to the house in the rue Neuve in 1682. As to the nature of his “guidance” of the Society, referred to in the letter, he had been obliged by circumstances to summarise this in another extended statement, the *Memoir on the Habit*.

The writers of the letter claimed that they had in view “*the greater glory of God, the good of the Church and that of (their) Society*”. The words revealed their consciousness that their Society was now a recognisable corporate unit capable, as such, of rendering invaluable service to the Church and, thereby, contributing to the greater glory of God. The latter phrase was a direct allusion to the formula of vows and it was a logical step that the letter culminated in an appeal to that formula as the grounds of the command “*in the name of the body of this Society*” to which the Founder had vowed obedience.

In saying that they deemed it of the utmost importance that he should resume the conduct of “*God’s holy work*”, the writers again used terminology they had learned from him and showed, at this supremely critical moment in the life of the Society, that his own long-held conviction was now firmly their own. By adding “. . . *which is also your own (work)*” they declared their belief that God had made use of him as the responsive instrument whereby the work was brought into being – an idea which, as Campos reminds us, corresponds with a thought of the Founder expressed in one of the personal rules: “*I must often recall that I am like an implement, useful only in the hands of a worker*”.

In such terms the Brothers expressed their conviction that the form of government their “*very dear Father*” had shaped for the Society, the structure he had given it, the way he had organised the schools, all represented the fulfilment of a task in accordance with God’s intention. John Baptist had wondered, to the point of feeling rejected by God, whether his own unworthiness had proved an obstacle to the divine plan, but these disciples were assuring him now that such was far from being the case: they were telling him that the plan had been fulfilled and that it was he who had made it possible. And they reinforced their assurance in the strongest terms: “*We are all convinced that God has given you the necessary graces and talents for the proper government of this new Society. . . and we acknowledge in all justice that you have in fact always guided it with much success and edification*”.

Such words, comments Miguel Campos, penetrated to the very heart of John Baptist’s self doubts. The burden of his opponents’ criticism had been that “*he did not know how to govern*”, and so often had this been said that he had finally become convinced of its truth. The categorical assurance he now read in the Brothers’ letter told him that God had not, after all, found him wanting. When he had thought himself rejected by his disciples he had equated this with a rejection by God. The converse equation held good now that his disciples made clear that they had *not* rejected him: neither therefore had God.

Paradoxically, the message the letter conveyed was not quite the one they were intending to convey. In this sense, though written by others, it became *his* parole-force, because he read in it a meaning which transcended the writers’ own. God made use of their words to give his faithful servant a directive which went beyond what the

words in themselves said. The letter, inspired by a desperate need of his presence, told John Baptist, in fact, that the Society was no longer in need of him. And when, in obedience to the summons of “*the body of the Society*”, he returned to Paris “*to resume the general conduct of affairs*”, his purpose was to do so only to finalise the structures which would replace him as Superior by another drawn from the Society itself.

There remains a further *parole-force* chosen by Miguel Campos to illuminate the closing years of the Founder’s life. This derives from the revision of the Rules which the general assembly of 1717 requested him to undertake. According to Blain, John Baptist applied himself to this task “*with great attention*”; and because a manuscript copy exists, both of the 1705 draft of the Rules, which was the one he revised in 1718, and of the 1718 version itself (both published in No. 25 of the *Cahiers Lasalliens* series) it is possible to discern what new insights the Founder had developed, with regard to this key text of the Institute, over a period of thirteen years. Campos chooses for particular consideration two additions made by the Founder to the 1705 text, in the form of prologues to two principal chapters of the Rules.

The first of these two additions is to be found at the beginning of the second chapter of the *Règles Communes*, the chapter on *The Spirit of this Institute*. In the primitive 1705 manuscript this chapter began directly: “*The spirit of this Institute is first a spirit of Faith. . .*” What prompted the Founder, thirteen years later, his life-work nearing its end and the charge of the Institute now in another’s hands, to preface this abrupt definition with an introductory paragraph? Campos’s answer is that the Saint was concerned that, in this revised Rule, when “*the body of the Society*” was seeking a legislative text which would provide for the most minute details, priority should be given to the spirit rather than to the letter. “*That which is of the utmost importance,*” the revised chapter began, “*and to which the greatest attention should be given in a Community, is that all who compose it possess the spirit peculiar to it. . .*”

John Baptist, able now to look back on the way God had led him forward step by step on a journey beset with temptations to discouragement, knew that faith was the bulwark which must sustain his disciples through the difficulties of their mission. If they were strong in the spirit of faith God’s work would continue to be

accomplished in and through them. From the very beginning of their spiritual journey “*the novices must apply themselves to acquire*” this spirit, and those who were already members “*must make it their first care to preserve and increase it in themselves*”. This spirit was to “*animate all their actions*” and “*be the motive of their whole conduct*”.

Having thus established the priority of the spirit, the Founder was able to present the rest of the second chapter in almost the same words as in the 1705 version. The spirit of faith was to be combined with a spirit of “*ardent zeal for the instruction of children*”. We recognise here the familiar synthesis, formulated now in the solemn context of the Society’s *Rules*: there was to be no dichotomy between the duties of state and the pursuit of personal sanctification. Prayer sustained by faith combined with work inspired by zeal, such was to be the way of fulfilling the Lasallian vocation. It was a way which the charism of John Baptist de La Salle enabled him to bequeath to his Institute; and countless disciples of his, down the three centuries of the Institute’s existence, who have taken him at his word, have demonstrated in their lives the sureness of his previsionary insights.

Another addition made by the Saint when revising the 1705 Rules was the whole chapter on Regularity. Campos centres attention particularly on the prologue to this: “*It is necessary that the Brothers apply to themselves, and take for the foundation and support of their regularity, what St. Augustine says at the beginning of his Rule, that those who live in Community should, before all else, love God and next their neighbour. . .*” The passage continued with examples illustrating the practical application of this great principle. The purpose of this prologue was to emphasise that regularity – the observance of a Rule – however essential to the effectiveness of an Institute’s mission – could be valid only to the degree to which it manifested love for God and love for one’s neighbour. Regularity which failed this test was, in the words of the text, “*quite useless for salvation*”, because love of God and love of one’s neighbour are “*the principal commandments given us by God*”.

This was teaching, as Brother Maurice Hermans has shown in his study, *Pour une Meilleure Lecture de nos Règles communes* (Paris-Rome 1954), which echoed the most ancient traditions of the Church’s monastic life, that had based itself on the ideal of the first Christian community in Jerusalem, delineated in the *Acts of the Apostles*. But the truth it contained could be lost sight of: structures could assume a greater importance than fraternal union; the letter of the law could

take ascendancy over the spirit of love. John Baptist, for all his profound conviction that regularity would sustain the Institute for the work God wished it to accomplish, wanted now to leave this message, that love is the fulfilment of the law.

Taken together, comments Miguel Campos, the two prologues, inserted into the Common Rules by the Founder within sight of his death, constitute a kind of enduring *parole-force* for the Brothers of the Christian Schools, a guide-line to safeguard their mission through the vicissitudes of time and place – faith, hope expressed in unflagging zeal in the service of youth, and love.

The saints have always understood, in practice, what it means to be a member of a pilgrim Church. They lived their lives as a journey of faith for which their guide-book was the gospel and their signposts the events and circumstances of their daily existence which indicated God's will for them and which, therefore, were to be followed unswervingly at whatever cost to self. And particularly striking exemplars of this model among the saints were those who founded religious congregations since, by definition, these brought fellow-pilgrims along with them, blazing a trail which subsequent generations of disciples have striven to follow, and with special concern today in the light of the Council documents.

A few years ago an academic thesis, awarded a Doctorate in Theology "summa cum laude" by the Lateran University of Rome, was partly dedicated to a study of this aspect of a particular founder's life; the author was a Cuban De La Salle Brother, exiled from his country, and the founder he wrote about was Saint John Baptist de La Salle. The present book is an attempt to convey to an English-speaking readership something of the wealth of research and insight that make up this part of the thesis. It offers a message of inspiration, in the first place, to the present-day Brothers of the Christian Schools and their colleagues, alumni and friends. But De La Salle's pilgrimage was, in differing circumstances, that of every founder and foundress – a story of discernment and fidelity without which the congregations they established could never have come into existence and rendered their manifold services to the Church and to the world.

Edwin Bannon is a Yorkshire-born De La Salle Brother, a graduate of the National University of Ireland, who has spent forty years teaching in his Institute's schools in England. Now retired, he is doing archival work at the central Archives of the Institute in Rome and, in his spare time, serving as a translator for the USA Lasallian Publications Board.