

**ST JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE  
and SOLIDARITY  
(2/2)**

**Brother Léon Curie**

**2. A VOW OF ASSOCIATION:  
HEROIC SOLIDARITY**

In choosing to use an educational approach that promoted solidarity, the Brothers were simply encouraging their pupils to have the same attitude which they themselves had adopted as a way of life in their young society.

In 1991, the Institute celebrated the tercentenary of a very significant event in its history: the vow of ASSOCIATION and UNION made by De La Salle and two of his Brothers on November 21st 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 ability and efforts the establishment of the Society of the Christian Schools in the manner which will seem most pleasing to you and which will be of the greatest benefit to the said Society.*

*And, for this purpose, I John Baptist de La Salle, priest, I Nicolas Vuyart, and I Gabriel Drolin, from now on and forever until the last surviving one of us, or until the complete establishment of the said Society, make the vow of association and union to bring about and maintain the said establishment, without being able to withdraw from this obligation, even if only we three remained in the said Society, and even if we were obliged to beg for alms and live on bread alone.*

*In view of which, we promise to do, all together and by common accord, everything we shall think in conscience, and regardless of any human considerations, to be for the greater good of the said Society.*

*Done on this 21st of November 1691, Feast of the Presentation of Our Lady, in testimony of which we have signed."*

**1. AN ACT OF SOLIDARITY**

This vow of association was an act of solidarity which bound three men together at a critical moment in the life of their young society.

Ten years had passed since their foundation in Rheims. New schools had been opened in Rethel, Guise, Laon and even in Rheims. A "seminary" had been set up to train teachers for village schools. This expansion seemed promising in spite of certain difficulties.

At the beginning of 1688, De La Salle came to Paris with two Brothers in answer to a request from the parish priest of St Sulpice. Several schools had been set up there already in spite of the opposition and the court cases instigated by the Teachers of the Little Schools or the Writing Masters.

But the prolonged absence of De La Salle from Rheims brought about the gradual disintegration of what he had built up with such great effort. The seminary for teachers disappeared as did the beginnings of a novitiate. Eight out of the sixteen Brothers left. The situation was no better in Paris where two out of the four Brothers left. For four years there had been no new recruits. Those who remained were tired and increasingly discouraged.

Faced with this "sad situation", De La Salle experienced a moment of doubt and uncertainty regarding the future of his society. As his biographer wrote, he was "very perplexed".

"He saw that he was almost the only one left, abandoned, without help. After giving much thought to the means needed to shore up an edifice which was in danger of collapsing as it was still being built, he was inspired to associate himself with the two Brothers who he thought were most suited to provide support for the young community".

**– Through fidelity to God's plan**

Many years had passed since that fateful March 15th 1679 when De La Salle's meeting with Adrien Nyel in Rheims had changed his life in a way he would never have chosen at the time.

From that time onwards, he had become increasingly convinced that it was God that had called him to follow his new path: proclaiming God's salvation to the "children of the artisans and the poor" through schools. He had been joined by others. Together they had done God's work, and it was with them that he wished to continue along the same path that God had marked out for him. He suggested, therefore, to Nicolas Vuyart and Gabriel Drolin "to bind themselves with him by an irreversible commitment" to work for the establishment of their society (Blain, Vol.I, p.312). Their act of faith is at the same time one of hope in the fidelity of a God who cannot abandon his work.

**– Through fidelity also to the poor**

If it was true that half of the Brothers had left, there were others who had chosen to remain with him. He could not forget some of the younger Brothers who had died, exhausted by their selfless dedication to their work. In almost all cases, those who joined him came from poor backgrounds. He himself had left his comfortable home in order to be more like them. He had bound his life to theirs for the service of the abandoned children of the poor. All those years of searching together, in a profession that was univer-

sally despised, had created real bonds of solidarity between them and himself which he could not break.

And how could he desert these children for whom the "Christian Schools" which he had founded with his Brothers were already bringing hope of a better and more dignified future?

As his biographer wrote, "His cause was that of the poor and common people. Having undertaken the education of ignorant and poor children, he could not let them return to their previous ignorance and bad influences without laying himself open to the charge of cowardice and weakness" (Blain Vol I, p.298).

#### - Through fidelity to a ministry

As the years went by, De La Salle could see changes taking place in his disciples as a result of his teachings and example. They had come to him as teachers, but it was not long before they wanted to form a community. As they began to call one another **Brother**, they wished to extend this **fraternal attitude** also to their pupils. Gradually they discovered that their profession was also a **ministry** to which God himself had called them.

As he thought about all these things, it was impossible for De La Salle not to see in these developments "the hand of God who directs all things with gentleness and wisdom" (Blain Vol, p.169), and who through his Spirit had chosen these men to proclaim "the Gospel of his Son" to the children of the poor (Med. 193,2).

They, like him, in spite of the precarious situation of their community, believed in its mission within the Church. They had already seen its "great usefulness". It would have been very difficult for De La Salle not to have seen his Brothers' great act of hope as a new call from God to pursue his work.

And so De La Salle was able to call upon Nicolas Vuyart and Gabriel Drolin to commit themselves to their **ministry** by an act of **faith and solidarity**.

## 2. SOLIDARITY NOT RESTRICTED TO WORDS

While their vow of association and union is first of all a sign of their faith in a God that cannot abandon his work, it is also a **contract** between persons who make a personal and joint commitment to use practical means to give **new life** to their community. Together, they decide to seek what "will seem most pleasing to God and of the greatest use" in their efforts to achieve this aim.

They must have thought seriously about the wording of their vow which now bound them "forever until the last surviving one", and even if there were only the three of them left and "they had to beg for alms and live on bread alone". For them there was nothing romantic about this "violence for the Kingdom of Heaven" (Mt. 11,12).

All the more so since this "Society of the Christian Schools", the work of God, to their eyes of faith, was also a human undertaking. In a certain sense, they were its "co-

founders". With the same faith with which they had made their commitment to God, they had committed themselves to one another "to do, all together and with a common accord, everything we shall think in conscience, and regardless of any human considerations, to be for the greater good of the said Society".

And so, the apostolate that they had been pursuing up till then in the context of a young and struggling community, had now become consolidated by the power of the Holy Spirit - the apostolate to offer a Gospel-based response to the needs of so many children and young people, cast aside because of their poverty, with no human future and not included among those to whom the **Good News** was preached.

It was the power of the Spirit also which led John Baptist de La Salle to decide on three other measures - acts of hope - mentioned by his biographer:

\* "To look for a house near Paris where Brothers who were exhausted and sick could recover their health.

\* To gather all his Brothers there during school holidays for a retreat which would give them back their first fervour and the spirit and grace of their state...

\* To set up a novitiate to train candidates." (Blain Vol.I, p.312)

One eventual result of this new creative impulse brought about by the Heroic Vow of 1691 was the **Conduct of Schools**. The author of the Preface wrote as follows:

"The Conduct was written and drawn up (by the late De La Salle) only after numerous consultations between himself and the most senior and most capable teachers among the Brothers of the Institute" (Preface to Conduct 2).

## AND WE TODAY

We are often invited to practise solidarity. These invitations come to us from all over the world and each one is more urgent than all the others.

What is our reaction?

What should our response be? Can we be satisfied with the occasional example of solidarity, in Lent, for example?

Our pupils need to learn the need for solidarity in their own class, in the place where they live. What do we do to help them learn this?

Do they see the need for solidarity among employees, faced with shortage of work?

And do we ourselves, as well as our teaching colleagues in our Lasallian schools, feel solidarity for the choice made by De La Salle and his two companions?

In what practical way could we nowadays become increasingly **new creators of hope** for so many poor young people who are so easily cast aside?

As in 1691, we can no longer avoid the issue. ●